

Yuuri Seo

Illust. m/g

The Body-Double Bride
Searches for Happiness
with the Reclusive Prince

The Princess's Smile



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The Princess' Smile: The Body-Double Bride Searches for Happiness with the Reclusive Prince Yuuri Seo

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"TAKE CARE OF
'SARA' FOR ME
FROM NOW ON."

Sara

A maid ordered
to become Hermine's
body double.

"SARA..."

Hermine

Princess of Saleilles.
Sara's second cousin.

"RIGHT.
COME IN."

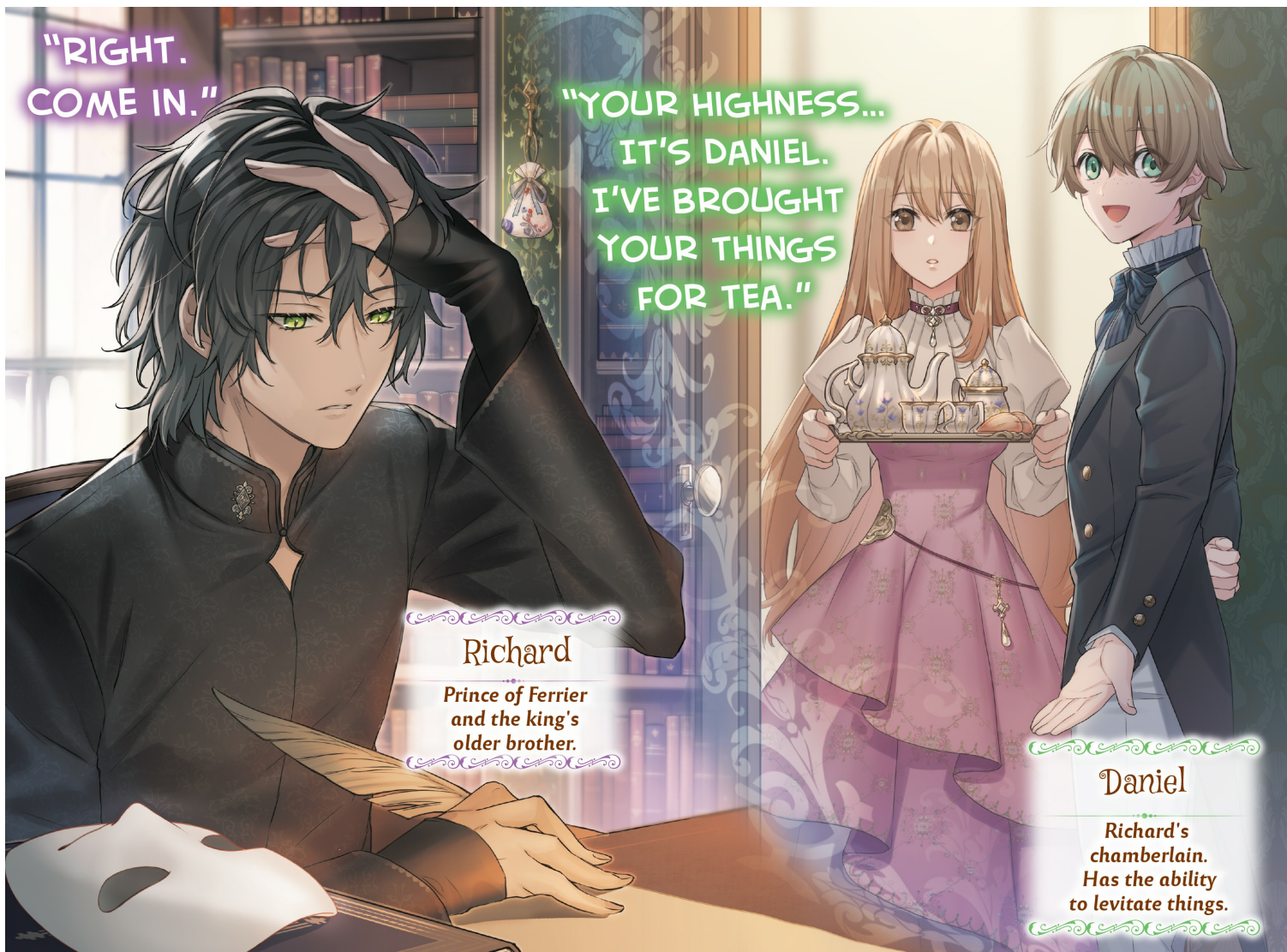
"YOUR HIGHNESS...
IT'S DANIEL.
I'VE BROUGHT
YOUR THINGS
FOR TEA."

Richard

Prince of Ferrier
and the king's
older brother.

Daniel

Richard's
chamberlain.
Has the ability
to levitate things.





"MY DEAR
WIFE..."

"Y-YOUR
HIGHNESS!"

"THEN I'LL MAKE
IT A ROYAL ORDER.
PRINCESS HERMINE...GO
TO YOUR HUSBAND."

The Queen Mother

Edouard's mother
and Richard's
adoptive mother.

Edouard

King of Ferrier
and Richard's
half brother.

Chapter 1: The Royal Maid Sara and Princess Hermine

“I heard both your mother and father have passed away,” the golden angel said sadly.

Sara, only twelve years old, nodded and clutched at her chest, crumpling the fabric of the black dress she wore as mourning attire.

“You poor thing... That must have been so hard. Do you have anyone who will take care of you?”

“No, I don’t,” Sara replied. “I’m all alone now...”

“In that case,” said the angel, her face softening in a gentle smile, “you should stay with me. After all, we’re second cousins, right? I was told I had a female relative who looked just like me, and I’ve always wanted to meet her. Let’s live together from now on.”

Sara lifted her head. The cherubic angel was younger than Sara, and she smiled reassuringly as she took Sara’s hand.

“I’m sure Father will allow it. What do you say? Let’s be friends! I want us to be friends forever and ever.”

The angel’s words impaled Sara’s chest, piercing through the fresh grief of losing her parents. A faint light began to glimmer inside Sara’s heart, which had been stained as black as her dress.

And so, Sara was given a place to call home.

Princess Hermine of the Kingdom of Saleilles scooped Sara up at a time when she had not a single family member in the world to turn to.

Sara vowed to devote her life to the princess who saved it. She would do anything—absolutely anything—to keep a smile on the princess’s face.

It had been six years since Sara made that vow, and now, at eighteen years of age, she found herself being summoned by the king and given the order to marry a man from a foreign kingdom in place of Princess Hermine.



THE Kingdom of Saleilles was located in a mountain basin in the central-western part of the continent. Compared with other kingdoms, Saleilles was considered a little behind the times because of its commitment to preserving age-old traditions, but to the people of Saleilles, their long-enduring culture was their pride and joy.

Sara stood, wearing a simple light-blue dress, in audience with the king at the royal castle of Saleilles. She looked up, her eyes wide with shock. The king was gazing down at her from his throne, and Princess Hermine quietly wept at his side.

What... What did His Majesty just say?

Sara's hands clenched into fists as she looked at the king's stern expression.

"May I speak, Your Majesty?"

"I will allow it."

"So...you've said that I will be taking Hermine's place in marriage...but may I know a little more about this arrangement?"

The king's order had been gut-wrenching, but Sara had never been one to immediately acquiesce with an "Of course! I understand!" without even asking for further details.

And the king, who had appointed Sara as his daughter's maid six years ago, was very familiar with her personality at this point.

The king nodded and ordered his prime minister, standing nearby, to fetch Sara a document lying on a pedestal.

"As you know," explained the prime minister, "we went to war against the Kingdom of Ferrier six months ago, during which our army was routed. We subsequently entered a cease-fire agreement. This is a collection of the terms from the peace conference with Ferrier."

The prime minister handed Sara a pair of gloves. She put them on and picked up the document.

Her heart banged against her rib cage as she read it over. *As a token of peace,*

the document stated, *Princess Hermine of Saleilles is to be wedded to the king's elder brother, Prince Richard of Ferrier.*

“Prince Richard...”

The prime minister explained the situation in simple terms for Sara's benefit—she didn't know much at all about politics.

“Ferrier's current king is a young man who is only sixteen years old. They have devised to wed Her Royal Highness the Princess to the king's biological half brother to use the princess as a deterrent against us. Ferrier is a small island kingdom, making up less than half the geographical size of Saleilles in area alone,” the minister continued. “But you *do* know the reason why our landing operation failed there, don't you?”

“I do,” Sara said after a slight pause. “I've heard that for centuries people in Ferrier have had a higher chance of being born with some sort of ability. The kingdom may be small, but the royal family has assembled these mutants and organized them into an army squadron, and so, when faced with this mutant squad six months ago, the Saleilles army fled.”

The war broke out because after the death of their last king, Ferrier defied the wishes of Saleilles and crowned the prince, then fifteen years old, as their new king.

Sara was incapable of judging which kingdom was at fault, but the fact of the matter was that Saleilles, displeased with Ferrier for pushing forward with its own plan despite its lowly status as a small island kingdom, landed their troops on Ferrier soil in an attempt to rattle them. After the ensuing conflict, however, Saleilles was forced to flee.

Many soldiers in the Ferrier army possessed strange powers, like the ability to shoot fire out of both hands or to incapacitate an enemy just by touching them.

But there was one among these mutants who was particularly strong—the one with the ability to control a black beast. Half of the casualties from the conflict were said to be the victims of this terrifying creature alone.

Talk of their pitiful defeat seemed to bring back painful memories for the prime minister, who grimaced slightly as he nodded.

“Because of that defeat, it was determined that Saleilles would recognize Prince Edouard’s ascension to the throne, as well as offer Her Highness the Princess to be the prince’s consort as a token of peace.”

“And so...I’ll take Princess Hermine’s place?” Sara asked, glancing up at the king and princess on the raised platform.

Hermine was covering her mouth with a handkerchief, shaking her head back and forth. Her beautiful blonde hair—very similar to Sara’s own yellowish hair—rustled with every shake of her head.

“I always wanted to do anything I could for the sake of this kingdom,” began Hermine, her voice as lovely as a delicate musical instrument. “But when I thought about marrying into the Ferrier family, with all those mutants over there, I felt so terrified and frightened...”

The two girls’ facial features were incredibly similar, but it would be difficult for Sara’s vocal cords to mimic Hermine’s sweet voice. She might be able to vaguely imitate it if she tried very hard, but she would almost certainly injure her throat in the process.

Sara could completely empathize with Hermine’s fears. The mutants’ abilities were terrifying powers.

Long ago, there were mutants all over the continent, too, but now, they were rarely born outside of Ferrier. Perhaps the island kingdom was particularly loved by the spirits. But for whatever reason, people born in Ferrier were very likely to possess some kind of special power.

There were even stories of one mutant in the past that could annihilate an entire platoon of a hundred soldiers in mere seconds.

Of course Hermine would be terrified of marrying into that kingdom—and one that had just driven out her own kingdom’s army merely half a year before, at that.

After all, Hermine was a sweet, sheltered girl with very weak mental fortitude. Sara had been living with her for six years now, but Hermine still always walked behind her. Hermine was a very delicate girl, too, spooking at the faintest sound of the wind.

His Majesty the King deeply cherishes Hermine. That's why he ordered me to take her place. But...

"Your Majesty, may I ask a question?"

"I will allow it."

"Princess Hermine saved me six years ago... It would truly be an honor to offer up myself for the sake of this kingdom. But...if I marry into the Ferrier family, won't someone realize the truth?"

Throughout the years, Sara's very essence had been forged to work for the sake of the kingdom—or more precisely, for Hermine. So although Sara felt some hesitation toward becoming her master's body double, she knew refusing the order would be impossible.

Sara was more worried about someone from Ferrier discovering the truth. There seemed to be so many different kinds of abilities at their disposal, and it would take just one person with the ability to read minds for them to realize she wasn't the real princess.

"Those worries are unnecessary," the king simply replied. "As long as you act the part of her standing perfectly, no one will find out anything. There may be many different types of abilities, but no power exists that enables someone to see into another's mind. And in any case, not a soul in Ferrier knows what Hermine's voice sounds like. They may have a portrait of her, at best. So as long as you conduct yourself correctly, no one will ever realize something is amiss."

At the king's words, a single, small drop of emotion fell into the depths of Sara's heart. Whether this emotion was understanding, resignation, or sorrow—she couldn't tell.

Regardless, Sara couldn't refuse the king.

And if this means I can repay the kindness His Majesty and Hermine have shown me...

"Sara?" the king called.

Sara nodded and returned the document to the prime minister before deeply bowing her head.

“I would be honored to accept this post. I...I exist for Saleilles.”

If Sara could endure this—if she could give it her all—then Hermine would get to keep smiling.

Even though she would be deceiving everyone in her new family, Sara could carry on for Hermine’s sake.



AFTER Sara took her leave, she was led by the chamberlain to the drawing room.

Right on cue, Hermine rushed in not long after, her eyes red.

“Sara! Oh, Sara!”

“Princess Hermine.”

Sara held Hermine tightly as she sobbed in her arms.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” Hermine blubbered. “I... You’re...”

“Don’t be, Princess Hermine. It’s fine. As long as you’re spared from this hardship, that’s all that matters,” said Sara, gently stroking Hermine’s golden hair.

Hermine looked up at her. Her skin was pearly white, even without any face powder on, and her wet eyes were large and brown. She was a little shorter than Sara and had a thinner frame—except for her chest, which was just as developed as any other young woman.

Sara was the daughter of a baron and baroness, and six years ago, her parents’ business went under. Just as they were working hard to get the business back on its feet, they were both killed in a tragic carriage accident.

In the blink of an eye, Sara lost not only her parents, but also her home and servants because of her parents’ debts... And Hermine was the only one who offered her a hand.

Sara was the daughter of a baron, and Hermine was a princess, but they were second cousins, united genealogically by a shared great-grandfather.

Sara’s mother was an indirect descendant of a duke, but because she

practically eloped with Sara's father, none of Sara's extended relations would welcome her as part of the family.

When Hermine learned of Sara's destitute situation, she proposed to the king that Sara become her maid.

But Hermine might needn't have said anything..., Sara reasoned. As soon as he saw me, His Majesty might himself have thought of making me a maid so that I could act as her body double someday.

Sara and Hermine were second cousins, so their facial features had always been somewhat similar, and, with some incredible genetic luck, they both had blonde hair and brown eyes. They had looked so alike growing up, in fact, that with the right makeup and outfits, they could be mistaken for sisters.

The king had given Sara the task of studying all sorts of subjects she would need in her new role, as well as ordered her to start "living exactly as Hermine does." Everything was suddenly different. The length of Sara's hair, the clothes she wore, her new personal effects... None of them were what Sara would have chosen for herself.

But Sara knew she really had no choice in the matter—she was a maid, and one rescued by the princess at that. She would have liked to have her hair cut a little shorter, and to wear purple and green dresses, not just pink and yellow ones. She wished she could play in the garden instead of meticulously embroidering, and laugh in a carefree and uninhibited manner like she used to.

But knowing this could never be the case, Sara smiled and put a hand on Hermine's shoulder.

"You've always carried a heavy burden as a princess. And being forced into a political marriage as a reward for that? Of course it would be hard on you."

"But...now *you'll* have to take my name and be forced into a political marriage, and I'll live a life under your name free from worry."

Sara felt a brief, sharp pain in her chest at Hermine's words, but she just shook her head.

"Yes, I guess so. But His Majesty made all these decisions with your best interests at heart. If anything, I feel sorry I have nothing more than my name to

give you.”

Sara would marry a man in a foreign kingdom as Hermine. Naturally, after that marriage took place, Hermine would no longer be able to go by her real name and title, so she would instead take Sara’s name and live as a commoner.

For someone like Hermine, who was raised in such comfort, losing her royal status and having nothing but the name of a bankrupt baron’s daughter would surely be difficult to come to terms with.

“Hermine... Thank you for saving me six years ago. Being able to repay the kindness you and His Majesty have shown me...makes me truly happy.”

“Sara...”

“Take care of ‘Sara’ for me from now on.”

When Sara smiled, Hermine’s sweet face crumpled, and she threw herself against Sara’s chest.

Hermine was a delicate soul, ignorant of the world, and endlessly kind.

My happiness is making sure Hermine can live her life peacefully and uneventfully...so everything will be okay.

That was what Sara believed.



FROM the next day onward, Sara would be Hermine, and Hermine would be Sara. Everyone was informed that the maid Sara would be temporarily relieved from her position as the princess’s maid due to ill health. Hermine was feeling quite emotional about the whole situation, so she was secretly living in the royal family’s second home in the capital city until her nerves calmed, hoping to have recovered her health enough to see Sara off when she departed for Ferrier.

Sara, meanwhile, was receiving a princess’s education in preparation for the wedding in two months’ time. Fortunately, however, Sara had often been present at Hermine’s lessons in the past, at the order of the king.

Truth be told, Hermine was not very good at academics and had often asked Sara for help during the tutors’ lectures, which Sara attended with her. Sara was

two years older than Hermine, had often walked around the capital when her parents were alive, and knew a lot about the ways of the world, so there were some things Sara was more capable at than Hermine.

There was nothing she could do about her voice, but otherwise Sara knew everything about Hermine—her habits, the way she laughed, the way she walked, and even her little quirks.

Much to Sara's relief, one day her tutor told her, "When I see you from the back, it's like I'm looking at the real Hermine."

Hermine's studious side could probably be fudged a little.

But...I'll probably have to wait a little longer to tell Firmin.

As Sara rested in her private chambers, her thoughts turned to her lover.

Firmin was the second son of a viscount and a member of the Knights of the Guard. He had long been Sara's childhood friend, and now he was her boyfriend.

The baronial side of Sara's family were originally wealthy commoners that ascended into nobility. This, along with the fact that barons were the lowest aristocratic rank, meant that not many families looked too kindly upon them. Firmin's father, however, supported her parents' business, and when Sara found herself out of her depth as the chief mourner during her parents' funeral service, Firmin's father offered his assistance.

She and Firmin had been friends for ten years, and after Firmin confessed his feelings to her two years ago, they began dating. Having been friends with Sara's father, Firmin's parents approved of the relationship. There were even talks of them getting married by the time Sara turned twenty.

The king told Sara none too kindly that she was not to tell anyone about the body-double plot. But Firmin would just have to be an exception—Hermine was going to live *as* Sara, after all. Even if she wanted to keep it a secret, Firmin would realize the truth the second he saw Hermine's face.

Sara needed to tell him as soon as possible so he could break up with her.

Firmin seems quite popular, even among the knights... I'm sure he'll find a

good girl in no time after we break up.

Sara felt guilty that Firmin had shown a fallen aristocrat like her such kindness for so long. Sara had been happiest simply holding his hand, talking with him in the garden, or accepting his kisses on her cheek. Without Firmin or his parents, Sara might never have recovered after the death of her parents.

Sara looked down at her itinerary and sighed.

Firmin was out on a military campaign with the knights, and he would return at the end of this month. But even when he came back, it would be quite difficult for Sara to go see him, as she was already living full-time as Princess Hermine.

Maybe I could leave a letter for him with Hermine, if she wouldn't mind...

She had often talked to Hermine about Firmin, and Hermine had always told her, "If he's special to you, I'd love to meet him!"

The estate where Hermine was recuperating was in the capital city, so it wouldn't be impossible for her to secretly pass a letter to Firmin. Even though Hermine was the princess, Sara would have to order her around like she was an ordinary aristocrat... But she was sure that Hermine would gladly do this for her.

"Firmin... I'm really sorry," Sara muttered, taking out writing tools from her desk drawer.

How would he react? Would he even feel a little sad?

No—Sara was *sure* he would be sad. But she was also sure that, in the end, he would accept Sara's decision and wish her well, perhaps even say, "I'll pray for your safety."

That was what Sara believed at the time.



AT the end of the month, Sara received word that Firmin's troop had returned to the royal castle. Sara, acting as Princess Hermine, listened to the report of the expedition from the captain.

But Sara couldn't ask anything about Firmin, not even "How is he doing?" So Sara stood there about to burst with impatience, listening to the captain who

totally believed she was Hermine.

She had already sent the letter to Hermine. She hadn't heard any reply, but the chamberlain who acted as her go-between had reported that Hermine looked very happy, so Sara assumed there wouldn't be any problems.

While all that had been going on, Sara gleaned some information about her husband-to-be.

"This is Prince Richard..."

A maid had brought Sara a very thin box with three items inside: a letter sent by King Ferrier, a brief informational sheet about his older brother Richard, and a portrait.

The portrait was done on a canvas roughly the size of a large book and depicted a young man looking straight ahead. It was done in grayscale, so Sara had no idea what color his features were, but his hair nearly reached his shoulders and had a slight curl, and his eyes were—for some reason—half-closed. He would probably have looked quite handsome if he smiled, but his lips were turned down in a sullen grimace.

I certainly get the feeling he's intelligent and blue-blooded, but... Maybe it's just customary for portraits to be taken with such a grouchy expression?

Sara tilted her head, asked the maid to prop the portrait upright, and turned her eyes to the informational sheet.

Richard would be twenty-four years old this year. He was the son of the former king's concubine but was adopted by the queen after his mother's death.

Sara remembered how her tutor had explained to her that the queen of Ferrier had given birth to a prince before but that he had died more than twenty years ago. Afterward, the queen had difficulty getting pregnant, so the king took on a concubine, who gave birth to Richard.

Eight years later, the queen was blessed with a son—the current king—and then adopted Richard after his mother died in an accident.

How incredibly generous and understanding of the queen... Although, I

suppose she's called the "queen mother" now.

As Sara continued reading, her expression grew more and more grim.

Richard apparently strongly disliked other people and shut himself away in the royal villa. Moreover, he spent most of the day isolated in his private quarters, rarely venturing out even to the adjoining hallway, and the only way to get in touch with him was through his chamberlain.

The sheet went on to say that Richard was a very learned man and that although the king relied on him behind the scenes when it came to political matters, Richard would never go out in the spotlight himself.

The document ended by mentioning that Richard wore a white mask at all times, that this was his own preference, and that asking him to remove the mask was forbidden.

You've got to be kidding me!

Sara trembled so much that she nearly dropped the paper, but she managed to hold on to it. She wasn't sure if Hermine knew about these reports, but she was sure the princess would never want to marry someone like this.

Nevertheless, despite looking slightly surly and listless, Richard was quite handsome and knowledgeable. He was also half brother to the king, who loved him dearly, so there must have been many women clamoring to marry him.

But despite all this, he was single, and this was likely due to his shortcomings being too serious for these women to overlook...

I have a rocky road ahead of me...

Sara's entire body nearly sagged at these hopeless prospects, but she quickly pulled herself up straighter.

Even if this marriage wasn't what either of them might want, both she and the prince had their own baggage. Sara couldn't say she felt great about deceiving her partner (even if it was at the king's order), but she certainly couldn't get found out as an imposter, either.

No matter how eccentric he is, we'll just have to get along—or at least be amicable enough to not argue!

“All right!” Sara muttered to herself with renewed resolve.

She looked closely at the portrait. Richard’s face simply stared back at her with a look that seemed to suggest the world was ending.



TIME slipped away from Sara in the blink of an eye. In only five days’ time, she would finally be leaving for Ferrier.

“What...are you saying?” Sara asked, the book on Ferrier history that she had been reading falling to the floor at the maid’s sudden announcement.

She couldn’t believe it.

She didn’t *want* to believe it.

What did she mean, “the viscount’s son Firmin is going to marry his girlfriend, Sara”?!



SARA could never refuse when she heard the words “Her Highness Princess Hermine is asking to see you.”

Sara assumed there must have been some reason for this new arrangement that was out of their control. Apart from Firmin, no one in his family knew that Sara and Hermine had switched places. Sara assumed that his parents must have pushed them toward marriage, or there had been some other grave circumstance that forced this to happen.

That was...until she met Hermine and saw her buoyant smile and Firmin’s slightly uncomfortable expression.

“What on earth is the meaning of this?” Sara asked in a trembling voice.

Hermine smiled gently again, clinging to Firmin’s arm. “I thought we should let you know! Right, Firmin?”

“Um, well...yes. That’s right...”

In sharp contrast with Hermine, who looked positively thrilled, Firmin, whom Sara hadn’t seen in so long, looked rather frightened. During the entire time they’d been talking, he hadn’t met Sara’s eyes, but he hadn’t tried to extract his

arm from where Hermine trapped it against her chest, either.

Sara had a terrible feeling about this.

She gulped down her thick, acrid saliva.

Calm down, Sara... Just calm down, Sara repeated to herself as she drew her face into an impregnable smiling mask.

“Yes, I wanted to ask about your announcement,” she said. “Firmin, you knew about our switch, didn’t you?”

“O-Of course. I got your letter from Hermine.”

“I see... And why did you and Hermine decide to get married?”

Sara had tried very hard to ask this calmly and with a smile, but they seemed to notice the hardness in her expression and the sharp edge to her words.

Hermine’s good mood melted away, and she tilted her head, looking at Sara with concern. “What’s wrong? You look so angry. Aren’t you going to congratulate us on our engagement?”

“I-I’m not angry. I’m just... It was so unexpected, I’m in a bit of shock.”

Sara knew it was a weak excuse, but Hermine didn’t seem to mind and went back to smiling.

“Oh, good! Guess what, Sara? I’ve fallen in love with Firmin! And since I’m going to be living as ‘Sara’ from now on, there shouldn’t be any issue with me marrying him, right? It’s a little weird that I’m replacing you, but I’m going to be Firmin’s wife!”

Sara’s body went as cold as ice. It felt as if she had been hit by something very hard—she couldn’t hear anything around her. The last time she had felt like this was the day she heard about the death of her parents.

Hermine...replacing me...and becoming Firmin’s wife?

It took all the effort Sara could muster to remain sitting politely. Hermine looked to be in excellent health, and Firmin was still avoiding Sara’s eyes. Together, they explained how it all happened.

When Firmin returned from his expedition, he heard that Sara wasn’t feeling

well and was recuperating at an estate owned by the royal family, so he went to see her. He arrived late at night, and it was so dark in the house, it would be impossible to see anyone's face clearly without some sort of light.

When Firmin went up to the room where Hermine was sleeping, he assumed that Hermine was Sara. And so, after Hermine undressed to her underwear in front of him, Firmin slept with her.

WH-WHAAAAAAAAAAT?!

Sara ought to have been praised for the sole fact that she didn't scream.

Firmin's face was pale, but Hermine, reliving that night in her mind, cupped her cheeks and looked dreamily into the distance.

"No one's ever wanted me that passionately before... I just knew I wanted to marry him! Isn't that right, Firmin?"

"W-Well, yes, but...! I thought you were Sara..."

"Really? But after I gave you Sara's letter the next morning, you slept with me again—don't you remember? You told me I was *much* prettier than Sara, and that my chest was bigger and softer, too."

Sara's head had been boiling with frustration at Hermine's betrayal and shameful behavior, but at these words, a chill settled inside her mind.

She could understand if Firmin had been seduced by Hermine, who looked very much like Sara, and spent one night with her on accident. But even when he found out the woman he'd slept with was not his girlfriend but the princess, he didn't care... Instead, he'd told Hermine that Sara wasn't pretty...

And even if it *was* that dark, could he really have thought Hermine was Sara for so long? Until morning? Maybe he realized midway through and kept going...

Firmin must have noticed Sara's expression darken, because he suddenly waved his hands in front of his white face.

"W-Wait! I didn't betray you, Sara!"

"But you slept with her even after you read my letter... You liked that Hermine had bigger boobs than me, didn't you?"

“That’s right, Firmin!” Hermine added, not a drip of malice in her voice. “We slept together lots of times that day, until the sun was high in the sky!”

This was a devastating blow to both Firmin and Sara, but Firmin, seeming to realize he had been cornered into the truth, took a few steadying breaths. Then he clicked his tongue and threw an arm around Hermine.

“Yeah, that’s right! I’ve never thought you were pretty, Sara, not once in the two years we dated! Hermine is so much more beautiful, and meek, and she dotes on me!”

“Oh, Firmin...,” Hermine cooed.

“You don’t have to worry about Sara, Hermine,” he continued. “We’ve already gotten approval from His Majesty the King *and* my parents.”

“Wh-What?!” Sara blurted out.

Hermine blinked at her, puzzled.

“I mean, we’ve already exchanged names and positions in life, haven’t we? My father said if I really love someone, I’m allowed to marry them. And the viscount and viscountess both believe I’m you, so they certainly wouldn’t object!”

Sara sat there quietly, steadying her breath.

“My father is going to give me the estate I’m living in now,” Hermine continued, “so after we’re married, I’ll live there with Firmin. We’ll have a happy, quiet life, just the two of us... It’s what I’ve always wanted, Sara. Don’t you know that?”

Hermine’s babbling just went in one ear and out the other.

Everything Sara had endured had been for Hermine.

She was going to take Hermine’s place in a political marriage.

She had been planning on cutting things off amicably with Firmin.

They trampled over everything with smiles on their faces.

Everyone already knew Sara and Firmin were dating. They would all wish the couple well with no further thought than *So they’re finally tying the knot, eh?*

No one would speak ill of their marriage. They could be happy together without anyone knowing the truth.

Heat rushed to Sara's eyes. Her throat felt dry. Her hands trembled. It felt like her brain was being wrung out like a wet towel. Her vision started to go fuzzy.

What... What did I put up with all this for?!

The moment that thought gushed forth, Sara could no longer snuff it out with the obedient answers she used to turn to—*because she's your master, because you owe it to her...*

Sara did want to protect Hermine's smile, and she knew that she was the only one who could.

But Sara wanted Hermine's smile—not the terrible behavior that accompanied it.

Sara had hoped that Hermine would one day marry someone under her name. That much was true. But stealing Firmin from her... Delaying giving him Sara's letter... It was too much.

And Firmin's parents were caught up in the background noise. Sara felt terrible for them, who were probably ignorant of the whole affair. The king, however, infinitely doting on his daughter, had spared no passing thought for Sara when he gave his blessing. In fact, he probably felt relieved that she had found a knight who would protect her for life. And with the two of them living on his estate, it would be easy to provide security for them.

I wanted...us both to be happy.

And, if possible, she wanted to spend her days smiling with Hermine. Even if Sara became unhappy, if Hermine was happy, that would be enough.

But Sara now realized that wasn't true.

So this is what you've decided on, Hermine...

Sara watched the princess quietly. What she saw wasn't the master she had loved and looked after for six years. She saw a woman who relished in her home-wrecking, who felt not the faintest guilt about her indiscretion, and who in fact fancied herself a heroine who had won love following a personal tragedy.

“That’s why we’re planning on announcing our marriage when you leave to become a bride yourself!” Hermine concluded. Then, after a pause, she said, “Hey... Sara?”

“...Yes?”

“Even though we’ll both be married women, and we’ll be far apart, we’ll always be friends...right?”

If Sara were any less of a compassionate person, she might have tossed the contents of her teacup into Hermine’s face right then and there.

The loyalty and affection Sara had held for Hermine for the past six years had already been shattered into a million pieces. And even though Hermine was the one who’d shattered them, there she sat, oblivious and boasting that they’d be friends forever.

Sara’s heart wanted to scream, “You have no right to say that!” But she held herself back and took a few deep breaths.

Sara forced down everything she wanted to say, everything she wanted to spit at her, everything she wanted to do to her... She donned the mask of the devoted maid Hermine wanted her to be and said:

“Yes... We’ll always be friends. Congratulations on your wedding, Hermine, Firmin.”

With everything inside her broken, Sara outwardly congratulated Hermine and inwardly destroyed all the bonds of friendship between them.

It was the last thing Sara could do to repay Hermine for everything she’d done for her the past six years.

Chapter 2: Consort to the Prince of the Kingdom of Strange Powers

IT was a clear, sunny day.

“Safe travels, Princess Hermine!”

“Bless you, Princess!”

Droves of civilians rushed to the harbor to see off Sara’s boat, waving their flags and pennants adorned with the Kingdom of Saleilles’s coat of arms. Sara, draped in a magnificent rose-pink dress, stood on the ship’s deck and waved at them, a graceful smile on her face.

The ship set sail, and Sara watched as both the people and the harbor gradually became a speck in the distance.

“You did wonderfully, Princess Hermine,” said the chamberlain. “It will be quite some time before we reach Ferrier, so feel free to relax in your cabin.”

“Yes,” Sara said with a nod. “I’ll go do that.”

The two of them slowly walked to her cabin, and Sara told the chamberlain that she was a little tired and would like to be left alone. Once she was by herself, Sara sat on her bed and let out a deep sigh.

She then opened her trunk, which had been placed nearby, and took out a flimsy wooden box from inside. From this box, she removed the portrait of Prince Richard that Ferrier had sent her.

She propped up the portrait by leaning it against her pillow. Sara smiled, but barely—it was more like a vague grin.

When Sara had heard the devastating news about Hermine and Firmin five days earlier, she had exiled herself to her bed. Those in the castle who knew about the situation let her be, and she had been very grateful for that.

To Sara’s surprise, however, she had barely cried at all. At one point, she

became worried that she had lost the capacity for sadness altogether, but fortunately, that wasn't the case.

It wasn't until the following morning that she'd realized that other feelings had overtaken her sadness at their backstabbing and their vilification of her—namely, anger and a strange feeling of exaltation.

Sara had been betrayed...by both her lover and the master she was indebted to.

It was undoubtedly a sad situation. But Sara was not some delicate flower who would collapse in tears, eternally inconsolable, unable to even eat.

Those jerks! I've never been so upset! I can't believe this! Those two are total garbage! Traitors! Worthless trash!

Once Sara had snapped, the loyalty she had held for Hermine for six years and any trace of affection or love she had developed for Firmin over the last ten years were all blown away.

Sara had been forsaken by her lover, her master, and her own king...

So what was she to do now?

"I will absolutely—*absolutely*—be happy in Ferrier!" shouted Sara, smiling brightly as she rubbed Richard's cheek on the portrait with one of her fingers.

Then she lifted a tiny wooden box out of the trunk and took out the object held inside.

It was a corsage roughly the size of a child's clenched fist. It looked like a rose, but it was actually made of several layers of thinly cut crystal stacked on top of one another. Despite its fragile appearance, it was rather heavy.

Her father had given it to her mother when they got married, and Sara had often looked at it as a child and admired its delicate construction. Despite the terrible state of her parents' bodies after the carriage accident, the corsage had escaped unscathed because her mother had worn it on her chest and simply folded over it. It was the only memento from her parents she had been able to keep.

Sara's parents had always told her, "It's all right to cry and feel down when

times are tough, but you must always find a way to get back on your feet.”

Sara wrapped both hands around the corsage and spoke to her parents in her heart.

Dad... Mom... I won't lose hope!

If Sara spiraled just because a few people she trusted betrayed her, and she ended up taking her own life, she would be too ashamed to face her parents in the afterlife. Sara wanted to become happier than anyone else so her parents could rest peacefully in God's presence.

Sara had every right to be happy.

But for better or worse, Sara was on her way to Ferrier, a kingdom filled with mutants.

She had no idea what kind of people awaited her, what the kingdom was like, or what kind of a welcome she was to receive. Given that she was the princess of a defeated kingdom, people there might even despise her.

But there was a possibility, however slight, that Sara could make a new life for herself in this kingdom and become even happier than she had been in Saleilles.

“Prince Richard... My husband.”

Sara had meant to murmur nonchalantly, but strangely, she felt embarrassed instead. Feeling self-conscious (despite saying it to herself), Sara automatically turned Richard's portrait face-side down.

His Highness... I hope he's a good person.

If Sara found happiness in Ferrier, she could snuff out any lingering attachment to her birthplace.

And then, if one day she crossed paths with Hermine and Firmin again... maybe she would be able to laugh everything off.



THE voyage from Saleilles to Ferrier took two days.

The seas were calm the entire journey. They never encountered any bad weather, nor did Sara ever come down with seasickness. The ship was met with

only a very comfortable breeze as it pulled into Ferrier's port.

Maybe...maybe this wind is pushing me forward, Sara thought, trying to be optimistic as the chamberlain took her hand and helped her off the ramp.

The salty sea breeze swept through Sara's long hair. She felt the sunshine, gentle and warm, on her cheeks.

The Kingdom of Ferrier was an island country shaped like a pancake slightly indented at the top, with mild temperatures year-round, and it was often blessed with fair weather.

The northern side of the island was slightly above sea level, with the royal castle at its highest point so that the royals could watch over the lives of Ferrier's citizens.

From where she stood in the harbor town at the southern tip of the island, Sara could see a very distant pale-blue mountain range to the north, as well as the miniature sprawling townscape of the royal capital.

The prince had wanted to keep his marriage to Sara quiet, so there was no extravagant reception for her at the harbor. Some townsfolk watched from a distance as Sara was led by knights in full regalia into a carriage.

I feel like I'm a criminal..., Sara mused, sitting in the dim carriage.

But then Sara remembered that she was no better than a criminal to the people of Ferrier, and that her presence might not be a welcome one. As the princess of a kingdom that had opposed the ascension of their current king and then started a war, she was lucky not to have stones thrown at her.

She could only imagine how she'd be treated at the castle. She may have been betrothed to the king's brother, but she was as good as a hostage. They may not try to poison her or murder her, but she had to prepare herself for the possibility that she may be treated as a nuisance at best.

When Sara arrived at the castle, she was ushered in through the back gate before she got a chance to get a good look at the castle's exterior.

I knew this was a country of mutants, but...from what I've seen, the people and the architecture look quite similar to that of Saleilles.

The castle looked newer than Saleilles's and was generally more roundish in shape. Even the surrounding town, which Sara could see from the round windows carved into the walls, felt brighter and more vibrant—perhaps because the roofs were painted in brilliant colors, like bright yellows and reds.

“We originally wanted you to have an audience with His Majesty the King,” said the young man showing Sara around, “but His Majesty is very busy at the moment... I’m terribly sorry, but I’ll show you straight to His Highness’s royal villa instead.”

The young man looked like he was probably younger than Sara, and he had an adorable, good-natured smile that stretched across his freckle-peppered face. He looked like he was wearing a chamberlain uniform, although the design was slightly different than the ones in Saleilles.

Sara had parted with her guards back at the harbor, and per the terms of the peace agreement, they would now only come visit her from time to time to check on how she was being treated.

So now Sara was left only with the young man at her side, and she couldn’t help wondering if it was all right for him to be so defenseless. But then again, he was a mutant, so even if Sara started to struggle, he could use his powers to suppress her—that was probably why security was so thin.

Even so, you could never be too vigilant.

But they didn’t meet anyone else on the way to the royal villa. Once they reached the pretty castle passageway that seemed to connect to the villa, however, the young man became incredibly talkative all at once.

“Oh—I’m sorry! I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? I’m Daniel, Prince Richard’s chamberlain. Since the prince is currently the only member of the royal family in residence at this villa, please think of this place as your own and make yourself at home here, since you *are* to become the prince’s consort.”

“Thank you... But I’m afraid I would just annoy everyone by acting like I own the place...,” Sara murmured, deflating slightly.



But Daniel blinked at her, looking puzzled, and then shook his head as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"Nonsense! If I may take the liberty to say so now that we're already inside the villa, we here are *incredibly* relieved that His Highness has finally found a wife!"

"...What?" Sara asked, staring at Daniel.

He smiled and looked out over the villa's gardens. Sara followed his gaze and caught the eyes of several gardeners, who seemed to be in the middle of pruning the trees. They looked at Sara curiously at first, but then they started prodding each other, stopped what they were working on, and bowed in her direction.

"They're the exclusive gardeners of this villa. All of us employed by Prince Richard have been really looking forward to your arrival! Although we've felt a little bad, as well..."

"You've felt bad?"

"Oh? Surely you know about our master, don't you, Princess Hermine?"

Does he mean the part where Richard's a hermit who hates other people and always wears a mask? Sara wondered.

"Even without the rose-colored glasses servants usually have for their masters, I can say that His Highness is incredibly kind—a very good man. However, he *does* have a *slightly* strong personality and he has a complicated past, which makes him prone to be rather brooding. We dearly hope that you two will live happily together, but we do feel guilty that a sheltered princess like you is saddled with being His Highness's babysitter!"

...That might have been the first time Sara had ever seen an attendant treat their master like he was a baby. But Daniel's theatricality was so funny, Sara couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Not at all! I read about His Highness's eccentricities in his informational sheet, but...you can't really know a person without meeting them first, can you? Besides, I'm the one gate-crashing here in this political marriage, so I suppose

that makes us even.”

“Wow...”

“Wh-What?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry. It’s just...I always assumed you had a more romantic and naïve view of the world. My opinion of you has improved!”

Daniel said it in a joking way, but Sara felt her stomach drop—was she not acting the way Hermine would?

But when Daniel saw how anxious Sara looked, he laughed.

“Oh, it’s fine! You don’t have to be so stiff. It’s like I told you before, starting today you’ll be the second master of this villa. We’re Prince Richard’s allies—and yours, too. So just relax, and please come to us about anything.”

“Daniel...”

He looked at her with such a genuine smile. Sara felt a sharp pain deep in her chest.

I had convinced myself the people of Ferrier were a bunch of terrifying mutants, totally different creatures than the people of Saleilles... But that’s not true at all.

Daniel was the only person she’d been able to talk to so far, but he was so kind, and even the gardeners who’d bowed to her before seemed very gentle.

Maybe I really can be happy here... Maybe...

A spark of hope blossomed in Sara’s chest, and she smiled.

“Thank you... Could you show me the way to His Highness’s room, then?”

“Sure thing! Right this way!”

As they walked to Richard’s room, they passed by people who looked to be servants and the knights who guarded the villa. They bowed in the Ferrier style when they saw Sara and Daniel walking together, and then they smiled and said, “Welcome, Princess,” or, “We’ve eagerly awaited your arrival, Princess Hermine.”

Sara wanted to return all the kindness being shown to her.

Initially, she startled whenever they passed someone, but she gradually relaxed and soon became able to greet them with a very natural smile.

The friendliness seems to be just another part of the Ferrier landscape... And perhaps a positive consequence of Prince Richard's personality?

In Saleilles, at least, servants never spoke to the royal family in such a familiar way. When royalty or nobility passed by, servants always withdrew to the recesses of the hall and lowered their heads. They were not even allowed to speak unless it was very important.

"Is everyone in Ferrier this friendly?" Sara muttered, watching a young girl of about ten who seemed to be a handmaid.

Daniel looked back at her and tilted his head. "Do we seem that friendly? I suppose it is true that His Highness allows us to be rather familiar and relaxed here at the villa, but isn't it normal to greet someone when you pass by them?"

"At Saleilles, servants could never address their masters."

"I suppose things are different over there... Oh! Would you like us to act a little more reserved around you?"

"No, it's fine like this... I like it like this," Sara said, a faraway look washing over her eyes.

Whether it was because Daniel noticed the emotion welling up inside Sara or for some other reason, he discreetly looked elsewhere. Eventually, he gave a small cough.

"Well... His Highness's living quarters are just up ahead. As his wife-to-be, that's where your private quarters will be as well, Princess Hermine."

Daniel explained that the entire fourth floor was for Richard's personal use. He did everything—from official business to eating and bathing—there. Occasionally the prince reluctantly went to go see his half brother, the king, but he otherwise basically never left the fourth floor. He was reclusive to the extreme.

Two men wearing light armor stood in front of the entrance—they looked like guards. They bowed to Sara when they saw her approach, then opened the

door. There was a small foyer inside, to which Daniel gestured and explained the handful of doors lining the walls.

“Beyond those doors are His Highness’s bathroom, living room, bedroom, and study. Behind that white door is the consorts’ suite—those will be your private quarters, Princess Hermine. Your bedroom is connected to His Highness’s, so you can go to him quickly if he summons you.”

“R-Right...”

Of course... I did come here to become Richard’s wife, after all. If he orders me to visit him, I’ll have to go...

Sara had known this since she had agreed to be Hermine’s substitute, but hearing Daniel say it out loud made heat jump up to her cheeks.

Daniel must have noticed Sara’s reaction, but he purposely glossed over it.

“Well, why don’t we go say hello to His Highness?” he asked before rapping on the door to the study. “Your Highness? It’s Daniel. Her Highness Princess Hermine has arrived.”

“...Come in,” came a young man’s voice from the other side of the door.

Sara felt nerves shoot through her—the voice sounded displeased—but it was too late to stop now. Daniel opened the door. Sara took a deep, steadying breath and then walked inside.

The room was very gloomy, despite it being the middle of the day. The gray walls didn’t help this, nor did the tightly shut window curtains. It was so dim, the desk lamp had even been lit.

Behind the stately desk was a man sitting in a leather chair, writing something. He was hunched over, so at first Sara could only see his slightly wavy slate-gray hair. But then he lifted his head—

Sara just barely managed to stifle the shriek that leaped to her throat at the man’s expressionless, blank white mask.

Sara stared. The prince’s soft bangs gently fell over the front of the snow-white mask.

It wasn’t one of the extravagant kinds people used at carnivals—it was a

white clay casting of a human face, and the only holes were over his mouth, nostrils, and eyes.

The mask didn't look like a real person's face—it was clearly just an uncanny, generic imitation to prevent anyone from seeing his real face. But it was strangely comical, seeing the stark contrast of the mask with the flesh tone of his right hand as he brushed aside his bangs.

“So you're Princess Hermine of Saleilles?”

Unsurprisingly, the bulge of his mask that mimicked lips did not move at all. His voice was slightly muffled, but Sara could still hear him. His voice was calmer than it had sounded before, and his tone was gentle. Sara could tell that her presence irritated him, but she didn't sense any overt hatred.

Sensing that Daniel was giving her a pointed look, Sara took a step forward and bowed.

“Yes. It's a pleasure to meet you, Prince Richard. I am Hermine, from the Kingdom of Saleilles. I have come to serve as your consort.”

“...Raise your head,” he ordered, a sigh weaving through his voice.

Sara looked up, slightly taken aback. She had been fully prepared to have the entire conversation with her head bent downward, if need be, but Richard had told her to lift her head—to be at ease—much quicker than she had expected.

Perhaps the prince saw, through the eyeholes in his mask, that Sara was staring unabashedly at him. He put down his pen, languidly crossed his arms, and leaned back into his chair.

“I only agreed to this because Edouard insisted upon it. I'm sorry, but there will be no friendship between you and me. In fact, I only ask that you stay out of my way. I may be a recluse, but I do have quite a lot of responsibilities to get on with.”

“.....”

“I can take care of myself, and if there's anything I need, I ask the attendants, like Daniel over there. There's really nothing I need from you. Your life here, at least, is secured, so just leave me to do things in my own way.”

Sara blinked silently at him several times.

She had heard that the king's older brother was a recluse—eccentric—a misanthrope. She knew about his mask-wearing, too. She could even tell something about his likes and preferences by looking around his study. But truth be told...

I thought he would be much scarier and meaner than he is...

Sara heard a huff of laughter from behind Richard's mask, perhaps because she hadn't spoken, moved, or reacted in any way. He unfolded his arms and propped his elbows on the desk. Sara felt a jolt run through her—even in such a careless motion, a vague sense of elegance and sex appeal radiated off him.

Richard may be a masked recluse, but he's still royalty, she realized.

"Are we done with introductions? As I mentioned before, I have things I need to get on with. Daniel will help you with everything else. You're dismissed."

"R-Right... If, um, there's ever anything I can do, I will—so please call for me if you need something—or if you just feel like it," Sara said in a rush.

Richard had never wanted to marry Sara. He only reluctantly agreed to it because the king had asked him to. He had no desire for the two of them to ever become a happily married couple. He almost certainly didn't want to have children together, either.

But I want to be happy here! I know I'm probably just an annoyance to the prince, but...it would break my heart if we were a cold, estranged married couple...

"O-Of course, I will obey your wishes, Your Highness. But my father told me to serve you with all my heart, and..."

"...And what?"

"Even if my father hadn't told me that, I would like to have some sort of relationship with you, and Daniel, and the others, because...there's no place I can go home to anymore."

Sara regretted saying the last few words as soon as they spilled out of her mouth. They were unnecessary and probably made her sound like she was

trying to use pity to persuade him.

But she could almost sense his discomposure in his white mask, and when his body twitched, he turned away from her altogether.

“I’ll say this now so there’s no room for misunderstanding.”

Sara swallowed nervously at his voice, which seemed oddly tense.

“I cannot make you happy. Do not ask me why. Even if we’re married, happiness will be forever out of your reach.”

“.....”

“I will, at least, make arrangements so that your life will be comfortable. If there’s something you want, I will do everything I can to arrange it for you... I’m sorry, but don’t hold out hope for me.”

Richard’s voice was cold and dispassionate, but for some strange reason, Sara felt like he was smiling sadly under his mask.



NIGHT had fallen.

Sara and Richard had read the congratulatory letters from the king and queen mother and looked over their wedding gifts together before dinner, but Sara had not seen him since then. She had tried probing Daniel for information, but he had replied, “His Highness will be reading over work documents tonight, so you should just get some rest.”

I guess that makes sense... Even if it’s our wedding night, making love is pointless in a relationship like ours.

In both Saleilles and Ferrier, it was customary for a bride to don a beautiful nightdress on her wedding night, wait for her husband to visit her room, and go to bed with him. But there was no need for Sara to do that.

But even so...

“I was wondering...if I could wish him good night, at least?” Sara asked Daniel nervously.

Daniel’s eyes widened ever so slightly, and then he broke into a smile.

“I think that would be all right! Besides...”

“Y-Yes?”

“It has been nearly fifteen years that His Highness has been living here alone at the villa, and there hasn’t ever been anyone to wish him good night until now,” Daniel explained with a gentle expression. “So I’m sure he would be delighted if you went to wish him a good night, Princess Hermine!”

Without fully understanding why, Sara felt a painful sinking sensation in her chest.

Fifteen years ago, Richard wouldn’t even have been ten years old. That was almost certainly around the time his biological mother had died, and Richard had lived here in the villa all by himself... Daniel and the others had probably wished him good night, but that was simply a servant hoping their master would sleep well.

He hadn’t shared a genuine “good night” with another person (“Sleep tight, okay?” “You, too. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”) in nearly ten years. In fact, Richard might never have exchanged a proper “good night” with anyone in his entire life.

Sara smiled faintly, and Daniel returned it.

“He’s still in his study,” he said.

So they both went out to the entrance and Sara knocked on the door to Richard’s study.

“...Daniel?” he asked.

“No, it’s Hermine.”

“.....”

He’s not saying anything!

Sara looked back at Daniel, wondering if she should continue. He nodded, so she let out a huff of air through her nose and turned back to the door.

“Um, I’m going to go to bed now, so...if it’s all right with you, I wanted to wish you good night.”

For a few agonizing heartbeats, there was only silence.

Then Sara heard heavy footsteps. The study door cracked open, revealing Richard's white mask and his suspicious eyes underneath.

Unlike Sara, who wore a dressing gown over her nightdress, Richard was still in his day clothes. He was probably going to be up late doing paperwork, just as Daniel had indicated.

Richard said nothing and stared at Sara in silence, but his demeanor seemed to insinuate, "If you have something to say, hurry up and say it." She looked up at him, fidgeting with the material of her dressing gown.

"Well... I'm heading to bed. Please look after yourself and get some rest, too."

"...Okay."

"....."

"....."

"G-Good n-night!"

She might have mustered up too much courage to say those words—her voice squeaked midway through.

Sara sensed that Richard's eyes were narrowing with even more suspicion under his mask. Her gaze fell to the floor. But before long, she heard a quiet "... Good night" and the sound of the door closing in front of her.

Her head snapped up, but all she saw was a shut door. No further sounds came from the other side, so Richard must have returned to his desk and gone back to checking his documents.

He didn't seem as pleased as Daniel had said he would be, and his reply had probably been a begrudging one, but at least they had been able to reciprocate wishes of good sleep. As far as exchanges with a prince who generally detested people went, that was probably the best she could have hoped for.

I hope that, with this, I can learn more about the prince, little by little...

Sara was sure that the real face hidden behind the mask was more than just one belonging to a grouchy recluse.



THE next day, Sara's life as the prince's consort began. But there was so little official work for her to do, she felt like everyone just wanted her to stay quiet and out of the way, like a hostage.

I read the letters from His Majesty the King and the queen mother, and they both seemed like totally ordinary, good people, Sara pondered. She had already been dressed that morning and was sitting at her desk, resting her face in her hands, waiting for breakfast.

The letters had included a number of niceties: "Thank you for being Richard's wife," "The villa is both of yours now, so please make yourself at home," and "We'll make introductions in person at another time, and I'll want to hear how you're getting on."

And far from being annoyed at her for being the princess of a defeated kingdom, they were even openly anxious about Sara's comfort as someone who'd become the wife of a fastidious prince. They were so kind, in fact, Sara started spooking herself, wondering if everything was really as fine as it seemed.

Sara took a deep breath and stood up, staring at a white door that was firmly shut. That was the door that led to Richard's bedroom. The lock, however, was on Richard's side, and there was no indication the door would ever be opened.

That's understandable, I suppose. It's not like Prince Richard will ever spend the night with me.

Last night was their first night as a married couple, but all they did was say "good night" to each other. Even after Sara went to bed, she lay awake, listening carefully, but she fell asleep without hearing the door to Richard's bedroom open at all.

It doesn't seem like he's woken up yet, either... He must be a late sleeper and a late riser.

Sara wanted to have breakfast with Richard to try to improve their relationship, but she didn't think he would be too keen on that idea.

Eventually, a maid arrived pushing a trolley with her breakfast. The villa had

several maids, but this one—Claire—had been introduced to Sara yesterday as her own personal attendant.

“Good morning, Princess Hermine,” Claire said. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Yes, I would.”

As Sara walked over, Claire quickly set the table and began preparing her breakfast. But then, Claire took the teapot she had filled with water and softly touched the surface of the cool water with her fingers. Almost immediately, Sara could hear the soft bubbling of boiling water.

I was pretty shocked when I first saw her do that yesterday, but her ability really is amazing!

“That must come in handy, huh?” said Sara, eyes glued to the teapot.

Claire smiled at her. “Thank you. I’m glad I can use my power to assist you.”

Claire was the child of low-ranking aristocrats, and she had the ability to alter the temperature of objects simply by touching them. Her touch could immediately boil water, melt a block of ice, or reheat lukewarm soup to just the right temperature.

Sara was surprised to learn that it wasn’t particularly rare for people to be born with that specific power. And after they learned how to control it in early childhood, it proved to be quite useful in their future careers.

Just the night before, Claire had adjusted the bathwater until it was a comfortable temperature and even warmed up Sara’s covers so she wouldn’t be cold when she crawled into bed. It might just be the perfect ability for an aristocratic daughter who wanted to work as a maid in the royal castle to have.

“I thought abilities would be much more terrifying,” muttered Sara, “but I guess they’re not so scary.”

Claire remained quiet for a few moments as she laid out the cutlery. She hesitated before speaking.

“It’s complicated... I just happened to have been born with a power that could be useful in normal, everyday life. But as you are probably aware, there are

others who are born with powers related to combat. Those people are trained in special schools and then join the kingdom's armed forces. And it's not just men—women can also join the army and fight to protect the kingdom in times of crisis, if they want to.”

Sara blinked in surprise at the usually quiet Claire's speech.

She has a point... Saleilles had overwhelmingly more troops during the war, but they still lost to the mutants...

Sara was silent, realizing she had spoken thoughtlessly, but Claire gasped and turned pale.

“I-I'm so sorry, Princess Hermine! I didn't mean to frighten you...”

“Not at all! It's fine. I need to learn about all of this, and I'm sure people with abilities have their own way of thinking about it, so that was a valuable reminder. Thank you, Claire.”

“I don't deserve such kind words...”

The maid still looked a little sad, so Sara put on a big smile and tried to distract her by saying, “Well, why don't we get on with breakfast?”

Sara ate as Claire explained each dish to her. By the time Sara was nearly done, she heard voices coming from the next room.

“Is His Highness awake?” Sara wondered aloud.

“It sounds like it. He was up doing official business until very late last night.”

“Does he always go to bed and get up so late?” Sara asked, dabbing the area around her mouth with her napkin. Claire grinned apologetically and nodded.

“Yes, usually. His Majesty the King drafts the documents during the day, and the prince reads them at night. They are returned to His Majesty by the next morning, so it seems to be a rather efficient system. His Highness also hates being around people, so he can go out for walks at nighttime more comfortably.”

“I see...”

So it wasn't that he was nocturnal, exactly—his daytime schedule was just

delayed compared with Sara's (and the rest of the world's).

In that case, it would probably be hard to have meals together...

Just in case, Sara decided to ask Claire if that was possible, but sure enough, Claire's eyebrows furrowed together.

"That would likely be difficult... His Highness has always preferred taking meals alone. I mean, it would be impossible for him to eat with his mask on, right?"

"Now that you mention it, that's true..."

Sara had heard that Richard always wore his mask. From the portrait of his real face, which was still in Sara's bedroom, she could see that, beyond his sullen expression, he was quite a handsome man. But seeing his face in person was not so easy, it seemed.

Sara slumped her shoulders and leaned back in her chair.

"I assumed we would have some brief interaction in our daily lives, but even that is proving a challenge."

"Wow... You really want to get closer to His Highness?" asked Claire, clearing the tableware with a slightly surprised look on her face.

Sara tilted her head and gazed at her.

"Is that so strange?"

"No... But you must have spoken to His Highness already, and yet you still want to talk to him... That just surprised me, is all."

Probably a reasonable reaction.

Richard had told Sara not to get in his way and not to expect anything from him. That was as good as a warning that Sara would largely be treated as a hostage princess, so she shouldn't hope that they would ever become a happily married couple.

But I still want to interact with him, no matter how short the interactions are... Even if we'll never love each other, I want us to at least be like friendly neighbors. And I want to find even a modicum of happiness in this kingdom—

with His Highness, if at all possible...

Sara couldn't force him to do anything, and she didn't want to.

But if the obstinate prince could at least see her for a little bit—if he could just let her get closer to him—then Sara would feel that casting away Saleilles and coming to this kingdom was all worth it.



"I have way too much time on my hands..."

That one sentence perfectly encapsulated Sara's life as the prince's consort.

Historically, wives of the king's brothers would accompany their husbands to official engagements or evening parties. Edouard, the current king, had been betrothed since he was born, but he and his fiancée had not yet married, so when a gathering was to be held at the royal castle, his sibling's wife might have also been tasked with helping the queen mother organize the event.

But Sara had no proper official business to do at all. She was a hostage who had been married off as a token of diplomatic friendship—there was nothing important they would leave to someone like her.

To make matters worse, her husband, Richard, was a recluse who couldn't stand being around other people. He would assist his brother with official duties and look over his paperwork, but Richard would never step out from the sidelines.

Consequently, there was no need for Sara to go *anywhere* with her husband. The only thing she needed to do was be docile and quiet, like the hostage she was.

Even so, I have way too much time on my hands...

Claire suggested embroidery or writing poetry. Hermine might have liked those activities, but Sara had never really cared for them. She preferred reading or walking to delicate, repetitive work. Given her current position in Ferrier, though, she thought it would probably be best not to go out on walks too much and thus refrained from doing so.

Just as Sara let out a sigh, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me, Princess Hermine. I’ve brought you some tea.”

It was Claire.

“Yes, thank you, come in.”

Claire excused herself as she entered the room.

“Oh! I smell frene! Did you pick some?” asked Sara, who had caught the gentle aroma the moment Claire had walked in the room.

With the silver tea tray in her hands, Claire started in surprise and stared at Sara.

“What?! I— Yes, actually. One of the gardeners picked some for you and I brought them up, but...did you know that already?”

“No, I just smelled them.”

“Your nose must be pretty sharp, huh?” Claire asked as she prepared the tea. Sara smiled and nodded.

Sara’s nose had always been very sensitive. Even as a child, she had shocked her parents and servants by correctly guessing the evening’s dinner menu from just the smell of ingredients wafting from the kitchen. It had been a very useful skill to have when she was Hermine’s maid, too.

Hermine had once complimented Sara’s talent of being able to identify the flowers and herbs in a basket by their faint scents. “It’s like you have an ability,” Hermine had told her.

Wait... Now that I’m thinking it over, was that really a compliment?

“I had no idea!” Claire said, sounding impressed. Her voice broke Sara’s reverie. “Oh...then does that mean you know what the flavor of today’s tea is, too?”

Sara sniffed and pondered for a moment. “I smell marlo. Did you add some wedges of marlo to the tea?”

“Spot on! Wow, that’s amazing!”

Claire excitedly lifted the lid of the teapot and, sure enough, there were wedges of marlo inside. Marlo was a fruit that grew in warm climates, and Sara

had once heard that all the marlo eaten in Saleilles were imported from Ferrier. Having been grown and harvested in their natural habitat, however, the marlo here looked bigger and juicier than the ones Sara had eaten before.

“You’re really something else, Princess Hermine! It’s like you’re the same as us, with an abi— Oh, um, never mind.”

Claire suddenly deflated and hung her head. Sara quietly looked at her.

The maid had almost certainly been about to say “with an ability.”

Sara didn’t know if there was an ability in Ferrier that enabled people to identify things based on smell, but Claire had been about to compare Sara’s skill to one before stopping herself midsentence. The maid probably thought she’d just cause trouble by comparing Sara to a mutant—that this would make Sara either angry or depressed.

“Claire...”

“I-I... I didn’t mean it like that...”

“You really don’t have to worry. You’re right—my sense of smell *is* just like an ability, isn’t it?” Sara asked with a smile.

Claire still watched Sara with worried eyes.

Just like an ability... That was how Hermine had phrased it before, too. But only Hermine knew what sort of feelings had inspired her to say that back then.

Now that she thought about, however, Sara realized that a keen sense of smell was a very unusual skill for a nobleman’s daughter to have, so Hermine implying that Sara was like someone from Ferrier—Saleilles’s enemy—must have surely been heavily laced with underhanded ridicule.

Sara had been born and raised in Saleilles, and even now that she was married, she was a hostage—nothing more than the ornamental consort of the prince.

Being compared to mutants now, however, felt like she had been given a handbook on living in this kingdom. In Ferrier, being told that her sense of smell was “like an ability” surely meant “You’re one of us.”

Sara gently took one of Claire’s hands. The maid’s terrified eyes shot up to

meet hers.

“I never thought my sense of smell was very ladylike, but if it makes you and the others feel a little closer to me, I couldn’t be happier to have it.”

“Princess Hermine...”

“So please don’t worry.”

This time when Sara smiled at her, the tension slowly drained from Claire’s face, and her lips pulled up into a small smile in return.

“You are so kind, Princess Hermine.”

“R-Really?”

“You are. Princess Hermine...if there’s anything I can do for you, I’ll do it. You can count on me,” Claire said—rather shyly, but that must have been typical for her.

After blinking a few times, Sara beamed—smiling this time not as Hermine, but as Sara—and gave Claire’s hand a squeeze.

“Thank you! Well, there was actually something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yes, ma’am! Shall I pour you a cup of tea so you can drink it while you talk?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The gentle scent of the marlo-infused tea wafted throughout the room.



SARA was incredibly nervous.

“Listen, Princess Hermine... You really don’t have to force yourself to do this. You know that, right?”

“I-I know... If I can’t do it, I’ll leave it to you. I just need your help.”

“...Understood, ma’am.”

Sara responded to Daniel’s uneasy look with a wooden smile before staring hard at the door in front of her.

She had been working with Claire for the past few days to come up with this

plan—Operation Get Slightly Closer to His Highness.

Sara was fully aware that Richard didn't like being around other people, that he did not welcome Sara's presence, and that he was a solitary, hermit-like creature. She had no intention of trampling over his household policies or personal opinions.

How on earth could she approach him while still respecting his feelings?

That was when Sara and Claire came up with a plan that would allow Sara to go to the prince's quarters regularly, even if only for a little while.

His Highness takes a tea break while doing his paperwork. Daniel or one of the other attendants usually takes him the tea set and serves him, so I've decided to tag along with Daniel for a little bit today!

That was how Sara had secured Daniel's assistance and was now standing in front of Richard's study, holding a tray that carried a teapot, teacups, baked goods, and various other items. Daniel and Claire were going to come in with her, so she shouldn't have any trouble talking with Richard or heating the water for tea.

All right! thought Sara, mustering up her courage. She signaled Daniel with her eyes. He returned with a nod and knocked on the door to the study.

"Your Highness... It's Daniel. I've brought your things for tea."

"Right. Come in."

Richard sounded in better spirits than Sara had expected.

Oh no... Is that because he thinks Daniel is the only one at the other side of the door?

Her relief at Richard's tone was short-lived—when she realized the shock he was about to receive, the blood drained from her face. But Daniel, totally unfazed, opened the door and showed Sara inside.

Richard's study was as dim as it had been before, but it wasn't dusty. Even to Sara's sensitive nose, the air in the closed-off room smelled relatively clear and even had a faint, sweet floral smell.

Scanning the room, Sara noticed a small sachet-like bag hanging from the

wall. The prince may have been a hermit, but he seemed to take care of the daily cleaning, ventilation, and perfuming of his rooms.

Richard was sitting at his desk. He was so absorbed in what he was writing, he didn't even look up at their arrival. And...

Unless there was something wrong with Sara's eyes...Richard didn't seem to be wearing a mask. His usual white one lay at the edge of his desk.

When Daniel closed the door, Richard brushed his bangs aside and looked up—right at Sara.

He's—so beautiful!

The prince's real face was so handsome, Sara couldn't think of anything else. He was much more gorgeous, certainly, than his portrait.

His nose was perfectly straight. His lips were thin. His skin was pale, perhaps because of all the time he spent indoors, but his complexion wasn't sickly. In fact, his fair complexion only enhanced the beauty of his sculpted features.

His eyes, which were depicted with a light shade of gray in the portrait, were a clear, bright green. Moreover, his eyes had been half-lidded in the portrait, but now, shocked at Sara's sudden appearance, they were wide open, making him look many years younger.

But Richard's real face was only exposed for mere seconds.

"What on—! Why are you here?!" Richard yelled, whipping his face away from her and grabbing hold of his mask.

He threw on his mask with such force, it was like he hit his own face. Sara had jumped at the growl in his voice and started to tremble. The teapot on her tray started to tilt and then fell—

"Ah!"

"Oh!"

Just then, the teapot froze in midair, slowly rose, and righted itself back on the tray. Stunned, Sara glanced back and saw Daniel raising his right hand, a look of concentration on his face. Sara quickly surmised that Daniel must have used some sort of ability.

“Th-Thank you, Daniel.”

“Not at all, ma’am,” Daniel said, smiling. “As long as you’re not hurt, that’s all that matters. However,” he added, turning to Richard with an exasperated look on his face, “I *did* warn you, Your Highness, did I not? Now that you’re married to Princess Hermine, you must be ready to receive her at any time.”

“You did, but...!”

“And besides, Princess Hermine already has a portrait of you, so there’s no need to hurry to put your mask back on. She’s already used to your face from seeing the portrait so many times.”

That’s not exactly true...

Daniel lectured Richard indifferently, but Sara felt like she was breaking out in a cold sweat. She certainly had looked at Richard’s portrait many times. In Saleilles, she had even kept it by her bed and wished it good night before she slept.

But a picture was nothing more than a picture. When Sara was faced with the real thing, any level of familiarity she had developed had flown out the window.

I had no idea he was that handsome...

Despite his withdrawn and antisocial personality, he was a royal. All royal and noble families were beautiful, even in Saleilles, and Richard was no exception.

Sara was both the distant relation of a duke and Hermine’s second cousin. Despite being the daughter of a lower-ranking aristocrat, Sara was said to be a great beauty herself and had taken good care of her looks since being brought in as Hermine’s maid.

Even so, as she stood before this beautiful foreign prince, she felt compelled to kneel and prostrate herself before him.

Sara could feel her face grow warm, but in the dimness of the room, no one else seemed to notice.

Claire urged her on, so Sara gulped nervously and lifted the tea tray slightly.

“U-Um... I’m very sorry for the sudden intrusion, Your Highness, but...I thought I’d bring your tea things instead of Daniel.”

“...You’re my wife, aren’t you? Are you to work like a servant? What is the meaning of this, Daniel?”

Richard’s voice was low under his mask, his displeasure evident. And yet, the target of his displeasure seemed to be not Sara but Daniel and Claire.

Does he think they’re forcing me to do this?

“Th-This is something I thought up on my own,” Sara hurried to explain. “Daniel and Claire just went along with my selfish request!”

“You...?”

“I-I’m sorry... I know you told me not to get in your way, but... Well, this was all I wanted to do. I’ll leave Daniel and Claire to take care of the rest... P-Please excuse me!”

It had become too hard for Sara to explain any further, so she put the tray down on the table and quickly walked away. Fortunately, no one called out to stop her. Once she was out in the foyer, she let out a heavy sigh and slumped against the wall.

I was wrong...

She had been selfish to ask this of Daniel and Claire—it just caused them more work and spiraled into this mess...

Even though Sara had propped the portrait against her bed board last night and practiced talking to it over and over, she hadn’t been able to speak casually to the real Richard. She’d even made him suspicious of Daniel.

I should apologize to Daniel and Claire... And I’ll have to apologize to His Highness, too, for ignoring his rule to stay out of his way...

As Sara brooded to herself, she felt heat and wetness at the corners of her eyes.

She quickly rubbed at her eyes with the corner of her dress sleeve and then patted both of her cheeks bracingly.

I can’t hem and haw over this! It was my idea, so I’ll have to take full responsibility for it.

As Sara sat rubbing her cheeks with both hands, the door to the study opened.

“Oh! Princess Hermine!” Claire came out. Her eyes widened in shock at the sight of Sara sitting against the wall of the foyer. “What’s wrong?! Come on, let’s stand up...”

“Claire... I’m so sorry. I messed everything up...”

“Come on, what are you talking about? Well, let’s get you back to your room first,” Claire said encouragingly, helping Sara up and leading her to her room.

Claire sat her on the sofa and quickly started fixing a cup of tea.

“Daniel’s lecturing His Highness as we speak,” she added.

“Lecturing...?”

“Yes, Daniel’s giving him an earful. I mean, His Highness totally disregarded your kind gesture, after all. It doesn’t matter that he’s the prince, the lord of this villa, and our master—a gentleman should not raise his voice to his wife.”

Claire spoke in a frustrated huff, but her hands moved with precision as she prepared the tea. At first, Sara couldn’t keep up with her rapid speech, so she simply watched her hands at work with a blank expression.

“W-Well, I did sort of insert myself into the situation...”

“Absolutely not. It’s just like Daniel said before. Even if His Highness doesn’t like being around others, and even if your marriage was born out of political necessity, it’s obvious that a husband should be considerate of his wife and be prepared to see her at any given moment. Besides, it’s not like you came to interrupt his work—you just brought him his tea set!”

“That may be true, but— Oh!”

There was a knock at her door.

Sara allowed whoever it was to enter and, just as she suspected, Daniel walked in. He smiled gently when he saw her.

“I am incredibly sorry for His Highness, Princess Hermine. I gave him a good, thorough talking-to.”

“Um... You won’t get in trouble for that, will you?” Sara asked nervously.

They’d mentioned Daniel giving Richard a “lecture” and a “talking-to”, but Daniel was just a chamberlain—Richard was the brother of the king. Sara could understand if Daniel were much older, but he was clearly even younger than she was.

But Daniel just closed the door and tilted his head in confusion.

“What? I’ll be totally fine. In fact, His Highness always tells us to freely and frankly express our opinions.”

“...Really?”

“Indeed. I’m not fond of lecturing him, and His Highness isn’t some hot-tempered toddler. If he knows he’s in the wrong about something, he understands and listens to what I have to say. Even just now, he was totally depressed.”

Sara simply couldn’t imagine that beautiful man with his grumpy face looking depressed as Daniel reprimanded him.

She must have made a strange face when she tried picturing it. Daniel smiled and made a vague gesture toward the firmly shut white door.

“His Highness grew up in somewhat complicated circumstances. The way he tends not to go outside, the way he avoids contact with people, the way he wears a mask... These are all coping mechanisms His Highness invented for himself so he could get along in the world.”

“Coping mechanisms...”

“But at the same time, His Highness constantly dwells on what he lacks... Our primary job as servants is to help His Highness and support him with everyday activities, but one of our other crucial roles is to help him become the man he wants to be.”

Daniel’s roundabout speech boiled down to this: Richard had many shortcomings due to his difficult upbringing, so the servants were tasked with filling in these gaps and, on occasion, teaching him life lessons.

So that’s how Daniel, Richard’s servant and junior, could lecture him...

That sort of relationship and closeness probably did not exist beyond this villa, but it was incredibly different from what Sara's experience had been in Saleilles.

Seeing her look of understanding, Daniel smiled.

"And so," he said, "you can finish having your tea first, but afterward, could you go retrieve the tea set from His Highness's study for me?"

"...What? Me?"

"Of course! It will be fine. His Highness may be rude at times, but he's incredibly honest and kind. Even now as he's drinking tea, he's probably thinking about the right words to say to you."

"Really?"

"That's right. Princess Hermine... His Highness has never once hated you, resented you, or thought that he didn't want to marry you."

Sara's eyes widened in disbelief. Daniel smiled softly, nodded, and put a hand to his chest.

"It would be presumptuous of me to speak for His Highness, and in any case, I wouldn't want to be the cause of any misunderstandings, so I won't say any more, but... Please get closer to the prince."

"But he told me not to get in his way..."

"...I can't really talk about that now, but I will say that His Highness does everything with you in mind. He never meant to treat you poorly or make you cry... Please believe that much."



SARA stood in front of the same door she had walked out of nearly an hour before. She was here, of course, to see Richard, who was still in his study on the other side of the door.

Daniel said Prince Richard had been depressed about how he acted, but...

Sara put her hands against her cheeks and groaned.

Was it really okay for her to go into his study? She *did* have the pretext of clearing away the tea set, but it might just make Richard even grumpier...

But Daniel and Claire both helped me get here... Running away now would just be embarrassing.

After steeling herself, Sara knocked on the door.

"...Daniel?" she heard Richard ask.

His voice sounded listless and slightly dejected. As soon as Sara heard it, her wildly beating heart suddenly calmed, and her wavering sense of duty hardened.

"No, it's Hermine. I've come to retrieve the tea set."

This was met with a short stretch of silence.

"Come in," he eventually said.

"Pardon me," Sara said as she opened the door.

Perhaps some part of Richard had expected this to happen. As Sara slowly entered the room, she noticed he had already put his white mask on. There was an empty teacup at the front of his desk. He seemed to have finished all the tea.

It was impossible for Sara to read the subtle changes in his facial expression under his mask, but his elbows were propped up on his desk and his fingers fidgeted restlessly. His face was turned slightly away from her, as if he were avoiding her gaze. He seemed fine with Sara coming into the room but didn't seem to know how to broach the subject with her, or perhaps how to phrase it.

I should probably wait for him to say something...

As Sara waited, she checked that the teacup, teapot, and plate were all on the tray. Then she went to fold the paper that his pastry had been wrapped in, but it had already been folded into a small, tidy shape. Richard seemed to have an attentive, earnest side to him.

"...You," he eventually said.

"Yes?" Sara asked, looking up.

Richard's hands were now neatly clasped on the desk. Their eyes met (at least, they probably did).

"I...apologize for my behavior before. You brought me my tea utensils out of

the kindness of your heart, and I raised my voice at you.”

Sara was too stunned to speak.

“I know this is just an excuse, but...I don’t like to show my real face very much. I’ve been wearing a mask for so long, and the only people besides my family who I interact with are my servants, so... I panicked and was sharp with you. I’m very sorry.”

Richard’s head sank further with every word. When he had finished, Sara walked up to him.

“Your Highness... I’m fine,” she said softly.

With how she stood over him, she could see the top of his head. His fluffy, wavy slate-gray hair looked soft to the touch.

“I was the one who didn’t even consider your preference for avoiding people and tried to rudely force my way into your heart. I deserved to get scolded for that.”

“That’s not true. I... I wasn’t scolding you. I was just taking my frustration out on you.”

Sara blinked in surprise.

Richard would probably have felt less awkward if he had argued, as she had, that he *had* scolded her, and that it *was* her fault. After all, even she knew that her own actions had been the catalyst for this mess.

But instead, he made the uncomfortable admission that he had just been acting out and apologized for it...

Daniel was right—Richard was honest, kind, and probably a very sensitive person. Most people would be far too proud to admit they had been thoughtlessly venting, but Richard didn’t seem to be.

Sara felt a strange fluttering in her stomach. At the same time, she mysteriously felt like crying. Heat pooled at the outer corners of her eyes.

“Um... Your Highness?”

“What?”

“If that’s what you think, then I will accept your apology. But...”

Richard looked up.

Sara spoke slowly and clearly so that, nervous as he was, he could hear every word from behind his white mask.

“I *did* rope Daniel and Claire into this, and my visit *was* a surprise attack, so there’s a lot I regret as well. I will never do something like that again.”

An unintelligible sound came from his direction.

“Pardon me?”

“...It was nothing.”

Sara thought Richard had said something under his breath, but he didn’t seem inclined to repeat it.

For a while, the silence hung heavily between them.

Then there was a *thmp* at the window. The two turned their heads toward it at the same time and saw a small shadow moving around on the other side of the curtain.

“A bird?” Sara asked.

“...They come here a lot. But it will fly away as soon as I open the curtain.”

“I see... Do you like birds, Your Highness?”

“...I don’t dislike them. Do you?”

“Yes. I love all sorts of animals—dogs and cats and birds... They’re all so sweet and cute!”

“I see...”

They didn’t speak any more about animals after that.

But oddly enough, the subsequent silence didn’t feel awkward or unpleasant.

“You...,” he addressed Sara again.

“Yes?”

“If you have any business with me in the future, or anything you’d like to tell

me...tell Daniel or one of the other servants before coming here.”

Sara’s eyes widened.

Apparently he’d seen her reaction through the eyeholes of his mask—he cleared his throat loudly before crossing his arms and quickly turning his head to the side.

“Just, please, no more surprise attacks. If you let me know beforehand, however, I won’t mind. But then, well, I suppose you probably won’t have any business with me, but...just in case. Right... Just so you know.”

A quiet giggle escaped Sara’s lips.

“What?” he asked.

“No, it’s nothing. I understand, Your Highness. I’ll be more careful about that from now on.”

Sara had sensed the flash of a glare at her laughter.

But...she was happy.

There was a “future” for them.

And in the future, as long as she got his permission first, she could go see him.

And that made her incredibly happy.



THE day after Sara and Richard settled on the rule for her future visits, Sara received a letter from the queen mother inviting her to the main castle.

“I wonder what the queen mother’s like...,” Sara murmured as Claire helped her get ready. Claire smiled brightly, combing through Sara’s hair.

“The queen mother Angelique is an icon for every woman in Ferrier, and that’s no exaggeration! She is a very modest and exceptionally loving woman. We all grew up with our mothers telling us, ‘Become a lady like Angelique!’”

That sounds like it would put quite some pressure on young ladies, much less the queen mother herself..., Sara thought, tilting her head slightly. But from what she could gather from Claire’s expression, the current queen mother seemed to have been the very model of a refined lady—the person all the ladies

in those days were meant to strive to emulate.

“I don’t know much about the queen mother... Could you tell me about her?”

“Of course! Well, first...I presume you know that His Highness Richard had an older half brother, right?”

Sara nodded, plucking from her brain every piece of knowledge she had learned from her tutor back in Saleilles.

“Yes. I’ve heard that two years after the previous king married, his wife gave birth to a son, the first prince. If I’m remembering correctly, the first prince passed away when he was still young, nearly twenty-five years ago.”

Claire helped fill in the gaps of Sara’s knowledge.

Many had hoped that the first prince would succeed the throne, but ever since he had been born, he’d been a feeble and sickly child. To make matters worse, his mother had been so weakened from his delivery, the doctors said she did not have much of a chance at having another child.

The king loved the queen, but even if the first prince did make it to adulthood, if his health was still poor, he might not have been able to fulfill his duties and responsibilities as king. And with the chance of the queen producing another heir being so slim, the king had no choice but to take a concubine who could give birth to a healthy son.

“...His Highness’s mother, Diane, became the king’s concubine. This was twenty-five years ago. The first prince passed away less than a year later—and about one year after that, Prince Richard was born.”

“That’s...”

Sara swallowed the rest of the words that had almost escaped.

I can’t imagine how the queen mother must have felt...

Her own child had died, and then the royal concubine had given birth to a healthy son. It didn’t seem likely at the time that the queen mother would have any more children, and if she didn’t, Richard, the concubine’s son, would become king.

“Um...,” Sara said, broaching the topic delicately. “Diane passed away as well,

didn't she? Fifteen years ago?"

"Yes, unfortunately. We didn't know what happened at the time, but... Prince Richard was only nine years old at the time. King Edouard was just one. Diane died at the royal villa where His Highness was staying. They say...she was probably killed by a burglar."

"A burglar..."

So she didn't die from an illness, like the first prince—it was murder.

Sara didn't feel that she could ask too many direct questions, so she fell silent. Claire let out a quiet sigh as she applied perfumed oil to Sara's hair.

"They were never able to find the culprit, so the case remains unsolved... The prince lost his mother, but the queen took him in almost immediately, and he became her adoptive son. At the end of the day, things were better for Richard this way."

"Even though his real mother died?"

Claire paused before answering.

"Diane was the daughter of a marquis, but she didn't have a very strong mind. Around the time His Highness Richard turned two, she shut them both away in a villa... Apparently, she was quite restrictive with His Highness as well."

"Restrictive...", Sara muttered.

Claire nodded and glanced at the closed white door.

"I heard that Diane became increasingly more unstable after His Majesty Edouard was born... There are many reasons why His Highness shuts himself away in this villa, but it all started with Diane. Everyone working at the castle knows about this, but of course, we are strictly prohibited from bringing up the subject in front of His Highness or the queen mother."

"I can understand that... I'll be careful not to, either."

"I really appreciate it, ma'am."

Claire didn't say any more on the topic and went on fixing Sara's hair and applying her makeup like any other day. As Sara meekly accepted Claire's

ministrations, her thoughts drifted to Richard as a child.

I knew that Richard's birth mother died, but I didn't know the full story... But why did Diane keep His Highness so confined?

Sara could somewhat understand if Diane was simply being overly cautious—because she was a concubine, if the queen had another son, the right of succession would transfer to the newborn. There were even cases in Saleilles's history of a concubine killing the queen's child because she realized her own was unable to become king.

But Claire had said the consort only started to act strangely when Richard was two years old. That was before Edouard was born and a time when it was doubtful if the queen could ever have children again. Was it premature, then, for Diane to have misgivings that her son might not become king?

I shouldn't bring it up, though... I'm sure His Highness and the queen mother have also thought of that.

Knowledge could be a weapon, but it wasn't something you should carelessly fling around or use to show off.

The insights Claire had shared with her were helpful, as Sara was going to meet the queen mother in just a few days' time. But Sara had to remember that if she disclosed information in the wrong way, or to the wrong person, she might very well be tying her own noose.



THREE days later, the queen mother sent a knight to the villa.

"Thank you for escorting me today," Sara told him.

"It's my pleasure," the knight replied, turning back with a smile. "Well, shall we go...?"

The knight stopped in his tracks.

Claire followed his gaze to the door. "Oops," she muttered to herself.

Sara craned her neck around them, wondering what was going on, when she spotted a black shadow standing in the hallway outside her chambers.

“...Your Highness?”

“Prince Richard, out in the hallway? That’s unusual, isn’t it?” the knight asked Claire.

“Maybe he was worried about Her Highness?” Claire teased with a smirk.

“You two be quiet for a minute,” Richard barked, looking put-out by their ribbing. He scowled at them from under his mask and then turned to Sara.

All the walls and floor of the hallway were bright off-white colors, so Richard, in his black pants and navy-blue coat, looked slightly out of place. Sara met his eyes with an unusual feeling in her chest, but just as she did so, Richard turned his face away, breaking their connection.

“I...heard you were going to see Her Highness the Queen Mother.”

“I am. She invited me to tea, so that’s where I’m going.”

“I see...”

“Is there a message you’d like me to pass on to the queen mother?”

“No... I just came to see what was going on. Travel safely.”

And with that, Richard turned on his heel and stalked back into his room. After his door had closed, Sara could hear Daniel and Richard arguing for some reason, but she had no idea what to make of it.

Sara tilted her head, staring down the now-silent hallway.

Um... So that was him seeing me off before I head out to the main castle, right?

It was a bit different from the typical send-off, but Richard, a reclusive homebody, had made the effort to come out and see her... She wondered if this meant he, in his own way, was concerned about her.

I don’t want to be conceited, but His Highness has opened up to me more than I ever expected he would. At least, I think so...

And if what Sara suspected was true, she was overjoyed.

She couldn’t help but smile. The knight saw this and grinned gently at her.

“His Highness seems to have lowered his guard for you.”

“Well... I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“There’s no need to be modest, ma’am! The queen mother has also been worried about you two, but if things are like this, it looks like I can give her a good report.”

“I... I see,” Sara returned with a slightly embarrassed smile.



THE queen mother, birth mother of the king and adoptive mother of Richard, lived in one of the best parts of the royal castle—a corner that overlooked a courtyard filled with roses that were in full bloom. And on that day, the weather was very nice, with barely any wind, so the queen mother waited for Sara under a gazebo in the rose garden.

“Wow... It smells so wonderful!” Sara cried as they passed by some of the flowers.

“Your Highness’s primary concern is how the flowers smell?” asked one of the knights. The rest of them chuckled.

They weren’t mean-spirited laughs—they were simply tickled by her comment—but Sara flushed red and suddenly realized she was in far too high spirits for such a serious occasion.

“Well...no. I just like way flowers and herbs smell...”

“The queen mother would be pleased to hear you say that. She enjoys picking flowers and herbs herself and filling sachets with them.”

“Sachets...”

Sara suddenly remembered the small bag that had hung from the wall in Richard’s study. It had seemed at odds with the rest of the gloomy room. Maybe Richard wasn’t actually interested in it himself, and the queen mother had made it and given it to her adoptive son.

Sara walked along the beautifully maintained rose-lined path with the knights and Claire, who carried Sara’s parasol, for some time.

Then the party suddenly came across an open space that was surrounded on all sides by rose hedges that formed a circle. A small waterway wrapped around a gazebo in the middle. The babbling of the moving water was very calming.

A woman in a dark green frock was sitting on a bench under the gazebo. Her dress was very simple—the only decoration was some silver embroidery on the chest—but when Sara took in the lady's quiet beauty, dignified aura, and perfectly straight and correct posture, she just knew that no one else could pull that dress off like her.

The queen mother looked at Sara, who stood waiting at the bottom of the gazebo steps. Her green eyes softened, and her mouth formed a thin, curving line as she smiled.

"Welcome, Hermine. I've heard so much about you."

Her voice was slightly husky and very soothing. Sara remembered once learning that the queen mother was almost fifty years old; her voice was both elegant and fitting of her age. Even though Sara was a woman herself, she couldn't help feeling enchanted by it.

Sara felt close to trembling from nerves, but she pulled herself together, lifted the hem of her skirt, and curtsied.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Hermine of Saleilles."

Then a thought cropped up in the recesses of Sara's mind: *I've gotten so used to introducing myself as Hermine*. She almost wanted to laugh. Then she wildly wondered how the real Hermine would act if she were standing here right now.

The queen mother indicated for Sara to take the bench opposite her. As soon as she sat down, the maids began preparing their tea.

"Firstly," the queen mother began, "it's a little belated, but...congratulations on your marriage to Richard."

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

"I hesitate to bring this up, but...how are things with him? He hasn't been rude to you, has he?" asked the queen mother, looking concerned.

Sara's mind immediately went back to what Richard said and did in the study,

and she froze.

But the queen mother saw her reaction, smiled apologetically, and slumped her shoulders, as if to say, “He can be a pain.”

“I always wanted to respect his desire to never be wed,” she confessed. “But your marriage into this family will act as a deterrent against aggression from Saleilles. My son Edouard has been engaged since he was very young, so Richard was the only one left... And so, you’ve become a part of this royal family.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The queen mother’s candid explanation helped Sara understand the bigger picture of her situation. She presumed that the queen mother laying all her cards out on the table like this was a show of good faith.

Sara was aware that Saleilles and Ferrier rested on a knife’s edge between peace and war, so she thought this honesty was a much better route than deceit or snubbing Sara as “better off not knowing.”

A memory flashed in Sara’s mind of the white mask turning away from her, and Sara took a deep breath.

“Your Majesty. I am fully aware that I am not the bride Prince Richard ever wanted. And...I had considered the possibility that I would spend my entire life without His Highness ever paying any attention to me—that I would be lorded over as the princess of a defeated kingdom.”

The queen mother remained silent but watched Sara attentively. There was no anger, displeasure, or astonishment in her expression. She held Sara in a comfortable gaze that seemed to say, “This does not surprise me.”

“But...His Highness does everything in his power to make sure I am never inconvenienced or wanting for anything.”

His fundamental attitude had been that Sara was not to get involved with him, but ever since she’d come to Ferrier, all her dresses, shoes, and pieces of jewelry were gifts from him.

He didn’t seem to know much about clothing, so he left almost everything to

Claire and the other servants, but he took pains to ensure Sara's life was without trouble, and if there was anything she needed, he saw to it that it was procured right away.

Sara explained all this to the queen mother, but still the woman's beautiful eyebrows knitted together in concern.

"Those things are expected of a husband. I know Richard very well... Are you sure he hasn't said anything rude to you?"

"Well... He certainly keeps me at a bit of a distance," Sara confessed, feeling rather confused, "and he's told me not to come to his study unless I have reason to."

"Oh, he has?" the queen mother replied, eyes widening in surprise. Then she smiled brilliantly. "That's wonderful!"

"It's...wonderful?" Sara repeated.

"Of course! Richard never lets anyone into his study unless he really trusts them. I go to the villa to see him sometimes, and even I've never been allowed inside that room!"

"What?!" Sara gasped, blood draining from her face.

Even the queen mother—his adoptive mother—had never been inside his study... He'd never *allowed* her in his study. Yet Sara had barged right in without even giving him advance warning. Of course he wouldn't have been happy with her after that!

"I-I've done something terrible...," Sara muttered.

"Something terrible?"

"I just wanted to get a little closer to His Highness, so I made Daniel and Claire help me out..."

Sara confessed everything that had happened. The queen mother smiled the entire time. The maids finished preparing the tea, and the queen mother continued to look happy even as she elegantly sipped at her cup. Meanwhile, Sara was beside herself with worry as she admitted all her misdeeds.

"So, yeah...," Sara finished, her words falling awkwardly into the silence.

“Have some tea,” said the queen mother. “For whatever reason, it seems drastic measures work better with that boy.”

“Drastic measures?” Sara asked, lifting her teacup.

The queen mother nodded, pointing in the direction of the villa with a slender finger.

“I understand why he doesn’t want to interact with other people, and I was never going to force him to... But I thought I had gotten through to him that he didn’t have to be that afraid—that he could relax a little more.”

Sara’s eyebrows furrowed ever so slightly. There seemed to be a double meaning to the queen mother’s words.

Maybe she knows the reason for Richard’s stubborn, self-imposed solitude...

It didn’t seem to be caused solely by a distaste of being around others or a dislike of making any effort, after all.

“You’ve clearly touched Richard deeply. The fact that he’s allowed you to come into his study is proof that he approves of you.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“It’s true. You know...I had heard that the princess of Saleilles was an incredibly quiet girl...” Sara’s heart dropped for a moment. “But that goes to show you can’t put much stock in rumors. You seem to be a very outgoing, positive person, and I’m so glad Richard married a girl like you.”

Sara’s lungs had regained the ability to breathe by the end of the queen mother’s speech.

The queen mother liked the *real* Sara. If Sara had stubbornly continued acting exactly like Hermine, she might have never been allowed to enter Richard’s study and might never have received the queen mother’s genuine blessing.

“It makes me so happy to hear you say that, Your Majesty.”

“I’m glad... Oh! What a beautiful corsage you have there,” said the queen mother, gesturing at the corsage—the heirloom from her mother—affixed to Sara’s chest.

Sara would always wear the corsage to cheer herself up in times when she wanted to feel particularly energetic or confident. Whenever she wore it, she felt like it kept her from dwelling on negative emotions.

“Yes. It’s not very expensive, but...it was given to me by my mother.”

“It was your mother’s... If it’s all right with you, may I hold it for a moment?”

“Of course.”

Sara would probably not have let a total stranger hold it, but she had no reason not to hand it over now. She removed the pin and placed the corsage on the tray a knight held out for her.

He presented the tray to the queen mother. When she took the corsage, her eyes widened in surprise. Then, in a rather unladylike fashion, her mouth fell open slightly and her green eyes narrowed.

“U-Um... Your Majesty?”

There was a short period of tense silence.

“...Oh, I’m sorry!” the queen mother said brightly. “I was just stunned by the gorgeous craftsmanship.”

A dark expression seemed to cross the queen mother’s face for a split second, but then it immediately softened back to normal. She took another close look at the corsage before returning it to the tray.

“It has some wear, but it’s very clear it’s been well looked after... You’ve been very careful with it, haven’t you?”

“I have. Oh—but His Highness gives me so many beautiful gifts, too! I wear different ones depending on the day.”

The queen mother chuckled.

“I understand... Hermine, please continue to look after Richard.”

Sara looked up at her. The queen mother’s green eyes were smiling, but Sara noticed just a hint of sadness at the corners of her lips.

“If you interact with Richard normally—the way you would anyone else—it will help him so much. I’m not suggesting you do anything special. Just...keep an

eye on him and lend him an ear.”



RICHARD’S consort left, accompanied by the maids and some of the knights.

The queen mother watched the girl’s straight figure retreat, and the gentle smile she had worn through their exchange fell at once. But the queen mother’s eyes softened, and she let out a heavy sigh.

“Queen Mother, will you be returning to your quarters now?” asked a knight.

“Yes,” she replied, nodding slowly. “I had a nice chat with Hermine, and I’m satisfied.” She looked up toward the royal villa. “I have to make Richard happy... And if Hermine has the power to break the chains that have bound him since he was born, then...”

Chapter 3: A Softened Heart

UNLESS Sara had special permission to go out, her world was limited to the inside of the villa.

On the one hand, the people of Ferrier were relieved and overjoyed that Prince Richard, who had been single and even girlfriendless for so long, had married at long last, yet on the other hand, they also wondered if it had been wise for him to marry the princess of the enemy kingdom of Saleilles.

That was why, Sara had been told, it would be best if she didn't wander around outside the villa. But she wasn't overly worried by this.

I should have expected it would be like this in a foreign kingdom... I can't find a single familiar title in this room!

Sara was visiting the villa's library with Daniel. Unlike the massive one at the royal castle, which was conditionally open to the public, the library here was small and compact. But even a bookworm like Sara had never seen any of these books before, so it seemed like a good place to relax and look for things to read.

She pulled out one of the books beside her and paged through it. It seemed to be a chronicle of some war. Sara's interest was piqued—she'd never read any stories based on Ferrier history.

Saleilles and Ferrier used the same language (with only slight spelling variations), so she was able to read these books without any problems.

"This one, too, please, Daniel."

"Certainly, ma'am. Why...you've certainly amassed a fair amount of reading material! Would you like to look for more?"

"I would, if it's no trouble," Sara said, feeling a bit embarrassed.

Daniel's eyes widened in surprise as he took the book from her. He waved his free hand at her. "Nonsense! Books are made to be read, aren't they? Besides,

we're so thrilled that you have such an interest in Ferrier literature, so take as many as you'd like!"

"Really? Thank you... Oh! Could I have all the books in that series over there? And that book way up there..."

Relieved by Daniel's assurances, Sara figured she might as well bring even more back with her.

"Thank you for coming with me... Are you sure that's no trouble?" asked Sara, looking back at Daniel carrying the books.

Although perhaps *carrying* wasn't the right word—he wasn't holding any books in his hands. In fact, he was empty-handed, with only his right palm faced upward, as if he were a waiter holding an invisible tray. And hovering in the air a few inches above it was a tall stack of around twenty books.

Daniel's ability was the power to levitate and move nearby items.

He had used this power the other day to stop the teapot Sara had been carrying from falling to the floor, but Sara was worried now, unsure if he could handle such a heavy stack of books.

Daniel laughed. "I'm totally fine! With my ability, the weight of the object barely matters. Balance could be an issue, perhaps, but not when they're stacked so neatly like this. Unsteady or limp objects can be challenging to move, though."

"I see..."

Abilities were truly mysterious powers. One of the books in the levitating stack was a research thesis on abilities, but according to Daniel, "not all abilities have been identified."

Daniel's and Claire's abilities (the power to move objects and the power to heat objects, respectively) were relatively common, so they were well documented in books, but countless abilities were not, such as ones that had only manifested in a single person throughout history, or abilities that had only been recently discovered.

The research thesis Sara was borrowing was a little dated, so it wasn't likely to

mention any newly uncovered abilities, but that didn't bother her.

All she had been taught in Saleilles was "Mutants are often born in Ferrier. Their abilities are terrifying powers." Sara had been with Hermine when they were told this, and Hermine had trembled in fear. In Sara, however, this had ignited a spark of curiosity. *What types of abilities are there?* she had wondered.

"You are quite unusual, Princess Hermine. Most people who come here from Saleilles are terrified of our abilities. The powers that Claire and I have aren't attack oriented, but they don't frighten you at all?" Daniel asked gently.

Sara thought it over for a moment and then looked out the window. She could see the courtyard, where the usual gardeners were pruning the shrubs. Most of them were using shears, but some of them were gathering the scattered branches and leaves into piles with wind from their hands.

"The question of whether abilities are scary or not is a complicated one...," Sara finally said. "One I don't think I can give a definite answer to."

"I see..."

"But it's not just abilities, you know? I mean...a knife is very useful for cooking, but it could be a very dangerous weapon if it were turned on another person. An embroidered ribbon is very beautiful, but it could also be used to strangle someone."

If he really wanted to, Daniel could use his ability to push someone down a staircase. And if Claire touched another person, she could seriously burn them or debilitate them with a fever spike.

"I've only ever seen you and Claire use your abilities in everyday life," Sara continued, "but even people who use theirs in war... Their abilities must have other uses besides killing people."

"So that's how you view things," Daniel mused aloud.

"Is it weird to think that way?"

"No. As a mutant, it makes me very happy." Daniel smiled and looked up at the neat stack of books. "I'm really glad you married His Highness, Princess

Hermine.”

“Don’t mention it. Oh! Now that I think of it, does the prince have an ability?”

Not everyone in Ferrier was born with one. There also seemed to be individual variations in how the powers manifested themselves.

Sara thought it had been an innocent question, but Daniel looked a bit troubled.

“No... The prince doesn’t have any sort of power. I’ve never seen His Highness display an ability, at least.”

“I see.”

“But...His Highness is a little sensitive about that, so please don’t ask him about abilities.”

As Sara absorbed this new information, she frowned.

From the bits and pieces Sara had heard, she knew that royal and aristocratic children tended to have abilities more often than commoners. For generations, nearly every member of the royal family had had some sort of ability and used it for the benefit of the kingdom. Perhaps being a royal without an ability was a sore spot for Richard.

Maybe Richard’s mother’s mental instability had something to do with an ability, too... As Sara pondered this possibility, she slowly nodded.

“I understand. Thank you for telling me this, Daniel.”

“Of course, ma’am. We’ll always answer any of your questions that we can, so if you come across something in a book you don’t understand, ask away!”

“Right. I’ll take you up on that!”

When Daniel and Sara made it back to her private quarters, Claire was in the middle of making tea. And—if Sara was seeing things right—it looked like Claire had brought Richard’s tea utensils as well.

“I’m back,” said Sara. “Is it almost time for His Highness’s tea?”

“Oh! Welcome back, Hermine. I was going to take this to the prince soon.”

“I see. Might I bring it to him?” Sara asked, while Daniel was putting the

floating books on her table one by one.

It had been nearly ten days since Sara and Richard had gotten married, and she had already developed a daily routine.

The first aspect of the routine was to tell the prince either “good morning” or “good night” every day. The second was to bring tea to his room once a day.

Sara had learned her lesson from her surprise first visit, so she always made sure Richard knew in advance (through Daniel) that she would be coming to his study so the prince wouldn’t be uncomfortable. As long as she did that, he usually let her come, although he still looked somewhat annoyed when she did.

But Daniel had told her, “At the end of the day, this is a positive influence on him!” So she hoped these visits weren’t entirely a nuisance to him...

Richard’s daily schedule was very irregular, so the times he woke up, ate, took tea, and went to bed could be different every day. Sara tried to adapt to his schedule and find the best times to give him her daily greeting or bring him his tea in an attempt to have some sort of relationship with him.

The queen mother asked me to look after His Highness, too... Little by little, I have to get closer to him.

“Of course you can!” Claire replied with a smile. “I’ve brought him butter cake filled with dried fruits to have with his tea today. “

“His Highness has a huge sweet tooth,” Daniel added. “I’m sure he’ll love it.”

“That’s great!” said Sara. “Is there marlo fruit and rico liqueur in the butter cake, perhaps?”

“Correct!” said Claire. “Your nose works really well, Princess Hermine!”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” Daniel teased, but Sara’s chest swelled with pride.

“It’s one of the few skills I have! Daniel, could you go see how His Highness is doing and tell him I’ll be bringing his tea? Claire, could you cut the cake for me?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

While Daniel was out, Claire cut two slices of the cake. Richard usually only had one serving of dessert with his tea, but perhaps he would eat two today.

Daniel returned.

“I’ve told His Highness that Princess Hermine will be bringing the tea today,” he reported.

Sara readied herself mentally, nodded, and picked up the tray where Claire had laid out pretty much everything.

“Well, shall we get going? Claire, would you open the door please?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sara headed to Richard’s study with Claire and Daniel, her shoulders pushed back as straight as possible. It seemed so long ago that she had first begun “Operation Get Slightly Closer to His Highness” and stood outside his door, holding the tea tray, wildly nervous. Sara felt a little embarrassed, thinking back to that first day.

“Princess Hermine is here, Your Highness.”

“...Right,” said Richard in a quiet voice. “Come in.”

The three entered his study.

Gloomy again today..., thought Sara. *Let’s see... Okay, His Highness has his mask on. All right!*

She always made sure that the prince was wearing his mask, just in case. After that, she curtsied and walked over to his desk.

A fresh stack of papers sat on his desk, and beside that was an inkwell and a stamp roughly the size of Sara’s fist. He seemed to have quite a lot of documents he still had to go through.

Richard leaned back languidly in his chair and watched her through his mask. She couldn’t read his expression, of course, but she could gather from the slight droop of his head that he was tired.

“You’ve been working so hard today, Your Highness. I have your tea here,” she said.

“Right... Thank you for bringing it to me again.”

Sara felt relieved. She knew that having to put his mask on every time she visited must have been irritating, but he never told her, “You don’t have to come anymore.” He just sincerely thanked her.

She let Claire handle preparing the tea—the maid’s ability to heat up water came in handy for that—and Sara arranged the butter cake and silverware on his desk.

“This is butter cake filled with marlo.”

“I don’t...,” Richard absentmindedly said before shutting his mouth.

“Pardon?” Sara asked quickly, worried she had done something annoying.

He looked from the cake to Sara’s face before lowering his head slightly and glancing away.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry, you didn’t do anything wrong. I...I just thought there was more food than usual today, is all.”

“Oh! So that’s what that was about.” Sara had thought the same thing earlier. “Claire cut the slices. You’ve been working so hard, I’m sure she wanted you to eat both—”

“There also seem to be two forks.”

“...That’s true...”

She examined the tray closely. Richard was right—there were two forks.

Could Claire have added an extra by mistake? Sara wondered, taking one of the forks and glancing behind her. Daniel was standing by the wall and Claire was still preparing the tea. They both just smiled back at her.

Huh...? But then, that means...

Fork still in hand, Sara looked back at Richard. He was watching her, too, and their gazes met through the mask.

“.....”

“.....”

“You...”

“...Yes?”

“If you...have no urgent business to attend to...,” Richard began hesitantly, “you should join me.”

Sara couldn’t take her eyes off him. Consequently, she didn’t realize that right behind her, Daniel’s and Claire’s smiles had transformed into mischievous grins, their eyes practically shouting, “Got ‘em!” She didn’t realize, either, that Richard was staring at the both of them.

Sara accepted his invitation. Then he told her, “Look that way for a moment.” She obeyed, looking away from him, and when she turned back, she simply blinked, speechless.

Sara’s silence stretched on.

“...If you want to say something, just say it.”

“Your mask... So you have different kinds?”

The mask Richard now wore looked the same as the other one around the eyes, but everything below his nose was uncovered—his mouth was completely exposed. His lips were pulled into a straight line, and his jawline, which had always been covered before, was clearly visible. How on earth could it be that, though the areas around his eyes and cheekbones were still covered, the parts of his face that were visible were as beautiful as a work of art?

“I can’t drink tea with that other mask. I don’t like to wear this one because it shows my mouth, but...I suppose I have no choice.”

Richard exhaled through his nose and took the tea Claire held out to him.

“You can sit down,” he told Sara, who had been rooted on the spot.

She nervously sat on the sofa, and Daniel placed a slice of butter cake on the table in front of her. Both slices had been brought in on Richard’s plate, but Daniel dished out one of the slices onto another plate he had procured seemingly out of nowhere.



Even though he doesn't like masks that expose his mouth, he's not telling me to leave..., Sara thought, watching Richard. He was eating his cake and avoiding looking in her direction.

She took her fork and cut off the end of her slice. It seemed denser than the butter cakes in Saleilles—crumbly instead of fluffy. The finely chopped dried marlo were about to fall off Sara's fork, so she quickly plopped it into her mouth and chewed. Her mouth exploded with the sweetness of the butter and sugar and the tartness of the marlo as her nose was filled with the scent of the rico liqueur.

"It's so delicious!"

"Do you...like sweets?"

Sara was caught off guard—she had never expected Richard to initiate conversation.

She looked up, surprised. She noticed his fingers were interlaced and that he was looking at her with a very serious expression. He still had half of his own slice of cake left, but he was leaving it untouched, waiting for her response.

Didn't Daniel say His Highness had a sweet tooth?

After taking a few moments to think it over, Sara nodded.

"I do. For my snacks and meals, I prefer sweetness to spiciness and bitterness."

"I see..."

"....."

...Oh no! The conversation will die off unless I say something! she realized.

Before the prince could look away from her again, Sara leaned forward and asked, "Do you like sweet foods, Your Highness?"

After a moment's hesitation, he answered. "...I don't hate them."

His answer wasn't quite what Daniel had told her...

But even in Saleilles, a surprising number of people thought it was "unmanly" to like sweet foods, so perhaps Richard's male pride was getting in the way of

the truth.

I'll try to meet him halfway instead of pressing the point too much...

"Is that right? I'd just be thrilled if we had the same tastes. Come to think of it, I find Ferrier's food much more refreshing than Saleilles's, don't you agree?"

"...All of Saleilles's dishes are far too strong, in my opinion. I assumed you wouldn't like our cuisine, if that's the sort of food you were used to, but...it appears I was mistaken."

The conversation is rolling smoothly. Excellent!

"The food here is more lightly seasoned," said Sara, "but there's a natural sweetness to it that makes it seem healthier, so I like it. I even feel like my skin has improved since coming here!"

She wasn't just blowing hot air, either. Even Claire had pointed out that Sara's skin had been looking more radiant, and Sara herself had noticed she felt physically better than she had in Saleilles.

This was probably partly because she had been freed from the physical and mental restraints she had been under in Saleilles, but she thought the food was a large part of it, too.

This was why she had so casually brought up the topic of her skin. She had been sure the prince would just respond with a noncommittal "I see."

But instead, he looked at her for some time, his mouth open, before very quickly turning away. Not a second later, just as Richard's wavy hair was swaying from the motion, his elbow smashed against his desk with a dull *thud*. Sara heard Daniel and Claire gasp from the back of the room.

"Your Highness?!" Sara asked. "Are you okay?!"

"I-I'm all right. I'm sorry."

"No—I mean—there's nothing to apologize for... Did something happen?"

She couldn't remember saying anything that would make him jerk away in such a panic that he would smash his elbow against the desk.

But for some reason, he just sat there, his right hand covering his mouth, his

left hand pressed over his forehead, eyes glued to the floor.

It all looked very strange put together, but Sara knew it would be very insensitive to point that out, so she quietly gulped and waited for the prince to speak.

“Brazenly staring at a woman’s skin... That was shameful of me to do. I apologize if I made you uncomfortable. I’m very sorry.”

“...What?”

He apologized again, but there was nothing she could have done to prevent it—she needed more time to work through what he was saying.

“...What are you talking about?”

“I thought...my looking at you would make you uncomfortable...”

“Of course it wouldn’t! It’s not like that would be the end of the world... I mean, we’re husband and wife, right?”

“...Oh.”

He totally forgot...

At this point, Sara was, if anything, impressed. She watched Richard closely. The prince seemed to have just inexplicably forgotten that the woman in front of him was his own wife. When their eyes met, he held his head with both hands. His forehead and ears, though hidden by his mask and hair, were almost certainly bright red.

“That’s...that’s true, but...we don’t have that sort of relationship, and...you’re my wife, but we don’t...”

“Your Highness...”

“I mean—you *really* don’t dislike me staring at you? You don’t feel repulsed or sickened or anything like that?”

Richard sounded genuinely concerned. Seeing this unexpected side of her husband, Sara felt her heart swell slightly—but then it sank in horror.

What in the world has the prince been through...?

There wasn’t a woman alive who would feel disgusted at being looked at by

Richard, a man both handsome and intelligent enough to carry out official duties as a member of the royal family. He may have looked grumpy in his portrait, but if he were to soften his face and smile, he would transform into a prince who could make any lady swoon.

Richard was unnaturally self-abasing, he had no confidence in himself, and he was frightened of other people.

Sara didn't have the greatest confidence, either. She had spent six years of her life believing she was Hermine's "extra," which had even made her think it was a good thing to not have any self-confidence.

But she couldn't help feeling like something was odd about Richard's self-deprecation. There must have been *some* reason for him to turn out this way—something that had caused him to become an introverted recluse.

And then there's his mother, the king's concubine... Maybe something happened that I can't even imagine.

Sara's heart broke to see Richard like this, probably shouldering this unimaginable reason on his own.

Sara looked down and took a deep breath. It was like she was dealing with a frightened animal—if she barreled toward it or forced it into her arms, it would only become more terrified.

She simply had to adopt a "wait patiently" tactic until the frightened animal approached her. If it did, she would hold it gently, and if it rejected her, she would calmly back off.

"I feel the total opposite of repulsed. I feel happy."

"Happy?"

"Yes. I'm happy that you were looking at me. I know I'm not the bride you wanted... But you looked at me, so I'm happy."

On that first day, Richard had let her down gently, telling her not to get involved with him. But she now knew that he hadn't said that because he hated her or loathed her for being the princess of Saleilles.

He had been *scared* of her.

He didn't know anything about her, which was frightening. When their eyes met, he simply had no idea what to say, which was why he had been trying to avoid her from the very beginning. He had assumed he had disgusted her by looking at her impolitely, so he had apologized.

Daniel had been right—Richard was overly differential and very kind.

Sara would bet anything that Richard had resolved to never hurt anyone else because he himself had been hurt in the past.

But these are just my own speculations... If I were to tactlessly bring any of this up to him, it might make him feel cornered or upset.

Sara put a hand over her chest and gazed steadily at the prince.

"In fact, I wish you would look at me more... Only if it's not disagreeable to you, of course."

"I—I don't find it disagreeable... But even if we are husband and wife, isn't it rude to look at someone so boldly?"

"Is it? I can't speak for everyone, but you don't have to worry about that with me. I'm not troubled over something so trivial," Sara declared proudly, pushing her shoulders back.

It wasn't just that being looked at by Richard wouldn't bother her. She wanted to get closer to him, so it would be warmly welcomed! She wanted him to look at her even more, so long as it didn't verge into the realm of indecency, even by her standards.

She enthusiastically began to tell him as much, but halfway through, Richard groaned and collapsed on his desk.

"I-I get it, I get it... Please don't push the point too hard."

"What? Oh...all right. I'm very sorry if I said something improper."

"No, it...it doesn't really bother me. But please, don't say those sorts of things to anyone else. Saying you want to be stared at...only say that to me. Okay?"

Richard's words had so much feeling behind them, Sara could barely believe they had been spoken by the reverential prince. But he seemed really out of sorts about it, so she quickly nodded in agreement.

"I-I understand, Your Highness. You're the only one who can stare at me... right?"

"Th-That's right. Keep that in mind."

"Right. I will," said Sara, suddenly becoming hugely embarrassed.

They each picked a different spot of the floor to look at.

Wh-What's going on? My heart's going nuts...

Sara didn't need a hand to her chest to feel her heart as it beat wildly against her rib cage and reverberated throughout her entire body. She never thought she was one of those girls who blushed easily, but her face and ears burned, and in opposite measure, her palms broke out in a cold sweat.

I—I have to say something to break the tension! Let's see... Oh!

"Y-Your Highness? Shall we finish the rest of our cake?"

"Yes. Right," he said without lifting his head.

Then Claire, who seemed to have become one with the wall until that moment, stepped forward and reheated Richard's teapot.

If you were watching that whole time, you should have lent me a hand...! Sara lamented with a sprinkle of resentment, shooting Claire a sidelong glance. But the maid just smiled brilliantly and avoided Sara's gaze. When she finished reheating the teapot, she took her spot by Daniel's side.

Daniel also donned an irritatingly bright smile, and when Sara caught his eye, he only mouthed "Good job!"

She would air her grievances to them later.

Both Sara and Richard had about half of their cake left. Coincidentally, they both used a fork to spear a piece and bring it to their mouths at the same time. The sweet aroma of tea and marlo gently wafted throughout the room.

"It's so sweet and delicious, don't you think?" Sara asked with a smile, her cheeks still quite warm.

"Yes...", Richard muttered, his thin lips curved in a fraction of a smile. "It is sweet and delicious."



“WELL, have a good night, Princess Hermine.”

“Good night, Claire. See you tomorrow.”

After Claire curtsied and left, Sara stretched out.

I wasn't able to wish His Highness good night today..., Sara realized, disappointed. She glanced at the closed white door that connected their rooms.

She had wished Richard good night nearly every day since they had gotten married, but today he had told her (via Daniel) that he was too busy. Indeed, if she listened closely, Sara could hear the shuffling sounds of paper and pen from the next room over, as well as the indistinct noises of what seemed to be Daniel and Richard in quiet conversation. Richard likely had more work to do tonight.

Sara had wished Claire good night, but she didn't feel quite tired enough to sleep yet, so she decided to read one of the books she borrowed the other day.

All these abilities are so fascinating.

Daniel had levitated many different kinds of books to her room, but she had taken the initiative to read the ones about abilities first.

Sara opened to the page marked by her paper bookmark and started reading from the heading “Types of Abilities.”

There are many types of abilities, but nearly all of them work by either acting upon an object or generating something...

Daniel's ability to move objects and Claire's ability to alter an object's temperature fell under the former classification, whereas the soldiers who attacked with fire in the last war and the gardeners who generated wind fell under the latter.

Sara had already learned this information from the book, but she had taken the trouble of marking this page because a thought had occurred to her the first time she read it.

Most of the casualties from Saleilles in the last war were said to have been caused by a jet-black beast...

Sara hadn't seen this happen with her own eyes, of course, but she had read about it in a report of the battle: *An enormous, black beast flew out from the Ferrier army and attacked the Saleilles soldiers one after the other. With its razor-sharp claws and fangs, the beast dyed the battleground red with their blood.*

The minister who had shown Sara and Hermine the report had said, "Perhaps there's an ability in Ferrier that enables people to control the animals they train for battle." Sara had learned from the research thesis that it wasn't *impossible* for someone to have an ability through which they could communicate with and give orders to creatures.

But does a massive black beast-like animal exist?

That was the mystery she was particularly curious about. Sara had asked Claire about it earlier in the day, but the maid didn't seem to know much about the beast, either. She'd only said, "I've heard that these days, whenever there is trouble in Ferrier, it appears out of nowhere like a guardian spirit."

Does that mean it's something totally different from an ability? But if it fights alongside the Ferrier army, someone must know the identity of the person behind it...

Claire hadn't seemed that interested in the topic, and Daniel, overhearing their conversation, had even told Sara, "Please don't bring that up too much, okay?"

Sara's mind spun in circles as she read until, suddenly, she heard clattering sounds from next door.

The prince's room...?

Sara glanced at the clock. It had been some time since Claire had left. Perhaps Richard had finished his work and was getting ready to go to bed.

I wonder if I could just wish him a quick good night...

Sara put the book down and quietly headed for the door. With a faint hope sparking in her heart, she opened her door and poked her head out into the foyer—at that same moment, she heard a door open to her right.

Richard stepped out into the dimly lit foyer. He wore his usual mask, the one that covered his entire face, and a slightly bulky black coat. The combination of his black clothes and his white mask looked ominous in the darkness of the night—Sara should have been used to his appearance by now, but she couldn't help but feel a tremor run through her.

At first, she could only see his profile, but then he seemed to sense her presence and quickly turned in her direction.

His green eyes widened in shock behind the mask.

"...Wh-Why are you...?" Richard asked, taking a step back, visibly upset.

Sara had taken him completely off guard. She heard Daniel, who must have been standing behind him, exclaim, "What?! Your Highness?!"

Richard must have been planning to go somewhere with Daniel.

The prince was clearly annoyed and shot a suspicious look at her. The small flame of hope that had warmed Sara's chest was quickly snuffed out.

"I...I just heard a noise and...I wondered if I could wish you good night..."

She was only met with silence.

Sara had clearly miscalculated. She should have just gone straight to sleep if her presence was going to be so bothersome to him.

"I'm sorry... I'll just...go back."

"...You do that. I am very busy... You."

"Y-Yes?"

"As you see, I'm going out now—don't try to stop me. Also, don't tell anyone about tonight... You understand, yes?"

Richard's command was rough, without a hint of friendliness, and left her no room to say no.

Sara, however, had no mind to refuse him when he spoke like that. She silently nodded.

"I understand... Well...be safe," she added after mustering up courage.

Richard didn't respond.

With the swish of the hem of his coat, he marched out through the door and into the hallway beyond. Daniel came out of the study and followed his master, mouthing "I'm sorry" as his eyes caught Sara's. After the two men left, silence settled over the fourth floor.

The silence was lonely, hopeless, and depressing.

Your Highness...

Sara returned to her living quarters and slumped onto the sofa. She had always wanted Richard to take off his mask and show her his real face, but today, she was grateful he had his mask on. Without it, she would surely have felt the full force of his eyes filled with anger and annoyance.

She hadn't sensed only mild irritation from him just then—it was outright frustration and impatience. He had even probably regretted the few moments he had been forced to stop and listen to her...

She wanted to become Richard's friend, as much as she could. But she didn't want it to be unreciprocated, nor did she want to force her good intentions onto him. She didn't want to stomp all over his own feelings or notions of how things should be, either.

I guess I got carried away...

Sara stood up and walked over to her armoire. She opened it and picked up the wooden box from the highest shelf. She took out the beautiful rose corsage and gently pressed it against her cheek.

"I didn't even consider how he might feel..."

Sara had been motivated by selfishness. *If I do this, we'll become closer... If I do this, it should make Richard happy, too...*

But it only resulted in annoying Richard and saddling Daniel with unnecessary work.

"I'll apologize properly tomorrow."

As Sara rubbed her cheek against the corsage, she felt like her mother was saying: "Yes, you must."

Sara was bathed by the moonlight that streaked in through a gap in the curtain, and small droplets dampened the flower petals like morning dew.



THE next morning, still worried about what had happened, Sara tried to subtly probe Claire for information.

“Is His Highness still asleep?”

“Yes. He went out with Daniel last night, so he must still be tired.”

Sara’s eyes widened.

So Claire knows that His Highness went out...

Richard had told Sara not to tell anyone, but she was probably safe talking about it with Claire... Sara reached for the plate of breakfast Claire had brought her, but then she noticed Claire hesitating slightly.

“Princess Hermine,” she said, “your eyes look red... Are you all right?”

“What?” Sara started. “They are?” She gently felt her face with the hand not holding a fork.

She had agonized the night before about how things had gone with the prince, but she had only wept for a moment. She had also spent some time sniffing in her bed, unable to fall asleep, but she hadn’t realized her eyes had gotten noticeably bloodshot.

“Yes. The skin around your eyes is red... Did His Highness say something to you last night? The only thing Daniel told me was that you happened to wake up and see His Highness leaving...”

“No... He didn’t say anything. I’m all right, really.”

That was true enough—Richard hadn’t said much.

Sara had been warned on that first day that she shouldn’t stick her nose into his business or get in his way. He had chided her for waking up in the middle of the night and trying to interfere with his activities, and her shock afterward had only been self-serving.

Sara pulled herself together, smiled, and cut up her crispy fried bacon.

“When His Highness wakes up, I’d like to bring him tea. Could you ask him if that would be okay?”

“...Certainly, ma’am.” Claire replied politely, but she shot a vaguely reproaching glare in the direction of the next room.



RICHARD ended up waking before noon, and it wasn’t until after noon that Daniel came and told Sara, “His Highness is waiting for tea.”

“Excuse me... It’s Hermine,” Sara said at his door.

“...Right. Come in.”

Sara felt her body tense with nerves as she entered the study with Claire.

The room looked the same as it always did, and Richard sat waiting for her, wearing the mask that didn’t cover his mouth.

Daniel had said that Richard was waiting tea, but he was really writing something. From the door, Sara couldn’t see what it was.

“Thank you for the tea. Put it over there. I’ll do the rest myself.”

“Um... Your Highness?”

When he didn’t respond, she pushed forward anyway.

“I’m sorry...about last night.”

His pen stopped moving at once. She thought her heart might stop, too.

I-I’m so scared, but...I have to say this!

Sensing Claire’s anxious gaze on her like a weight, Sara hurried to finish her piece before Richard could say something.

“I didn’t consider your feelings... I wanted us to be closer, but I just ended up annoying you and causing you trouble. I’ll be more mindful about that from now on.”

Richard’s wall of silence continued.

“That... That’s all I wanted to say. Excuse m—”

“You.”

Sara's heart leaped into her throat. She had just been about to turn around and take her leave.

Looking up, she saw Richard resting his chin on his hands over the desk, his eyes zeroed in on her. There was some tension in his mouth, as there usually was, but this time it didn't seem to suggest that he was upset or displeased...

Instead, he looked amused...

"Are you a fool?"

"...A fool?"

"*Fool* might be taking it too far, but... Let's not rehash what happened last night. Why don't we just go on like nothing happened? I know you came out to see me with only good intentions, so there's absolutely no need for you to apologize."

"...What?"

"If anything, I'm the one who should apologize..."

Richard lowered his arms and rose to his feet.

Sara had never seen him standing in the study before. She watched him walk around the desk with a blank face. He stopped right in front of her, his thin lips parted.

"I had something I had to do last night, and I was frustrated. When I saw you in the foyer, I couldn't control my annoyance enough to be cordial to you... A husband should never rebuff his wife's consideration for him, even if he is in a hurry. I made you sad."

He raised his right hand and gently brushed her left cheek. He touched the slight dip of the outer corner of her eye with the soft pad of his thumb, and the rest of his fingers gently cupped along her jawline.

At such a short distance, Sara could see his green eyes twinkling behind the eyeholes of his mask. His eyes searched hers—which were still probably pink from the night before—and as this clicked in Sara's head, blood rushed to her cheeks.

"That's—uh—no—that's not—"

"I made you cry, didn't I?"

"No, you didn't! It's...because I read a sad story after we saw each other last night!"

...An awkward stillness filled the study.

Th-That was such an awful excuse!

The silence was painful.

Say something! Sara pleaded with her eyes.

Richard made a little *hm* sound in his throat before saying, "...Would that be one of the books you borrowed from the library, by any chance?"

"Y-Yes, it was!"

"But Daniel told me you only took out books about abilities and history."

"....."

That was a total setup!

Sara glared at him—half seriously.

Richard chuckled, his mouth relaxing into a small grin. A quiet sigh escaped.

"It was because of me, after all. I'm sorry."

"It's fine... Really. I have no intention of getting involved with your personal affairs, Your Highness."

"...To be honest with you, I'm grateful for that. But it's not because I want to reject you or make you an outcast. It's just...the less you're involved with me, the safer you'll be."

The sad tone of his voice suddenly made Sara feel uneasy.

What does that mean?

She gave him a questioning look, but he just smiled sadly and shook his head.

"I'll ask you again... From now on, if I'm going somewhere in the middle of the night...you must not try to stop me. And please don't ask me why I'm going out, either."

“.....”

“Okay?”

Sara swallowed.

Richard was the king’s older brother—the third most important person in the kingdom, after the king and the queen mother. Sara was just the princess of a defeated kingdom. He was well within his rights to order her around, regardless of what she felt on the matter. He could even make her comply by force.

And yet, instead of telling her “Do this now,” he’d say, “Please do this.”

Although he could be snappy at times, at the end of the day, Richard was a kind and slightly awkward...scaredy cat.

“...I understand. As you wish, Your Highness.”

“Thank you... Well, Claire will prepare my tea, so you may return to your quarters for now.”

“Okay.”

Richard finally took his hand off Sara’s face. She felt a tiny pinch of sadness and quickly turned away so Richard and Claire couldn’t see the sudden shade of red her cheeks had turned.

...Huh?

Sara’s nose suddenly picked up an unfamiliar smell. She looked around.

In the back of the room, Claire had briskly started preparing Richard’s tea. Richard had returned to his desk to resume his writing until the tea was ready.

What is that smell? Sara wondered, wandering over to the wall. She noticed a black coat hanging there.

Oh! That’s what Richard wore last night...

She sniffed again and tilted her head slightly.

“What’s wrong?” she heard him ask suspiciously from behind her.

“Nothing!” Sara answered, quickly leaving the study. As she walked back to her room, she wondered, *Why did that coat smell like an animal...?*



A gentle rain was coming down the day Sara and Richard were both summoned to the main castle.

“Your Highness... Are you okay?” she asked.

“I don’t want to go, but I suppose I have to.”

Richard let out a big sigh. A letter, which had arrived three days ago from the main castle, was lying on the table in front of him. It was from the king himself and essentially said, “It’s about time I said my hellos, so come visit with your wife, okay?” The actual letter had been written in an incredibly formal style, however.

I’ve met the queen mother, but I haven’t met His Majesty the King yet...

Sara and Richard had been married for one month. Her life in the villa was surprisingly peaceful, and she had very little to do with the main castle. Richard was a recluse, of course, so even when the main castle did have work for him, they simply sent a messenger to the villa. There had been hardly any issues at all so far.

Sara glanced at Richard, who sat across from her.

He usually preferred to wear dark clothes, but today he had changed into his formal dress. The formal coats for men in Ferrier were longer than the ones in Saleilles, and they were held together with cords and sash robes instead of buttons and badges.

Richard’s mask was off, too, and he seemed incredibly put out by this. His eyebrows, which were the same color as his hair, were furrowed so hard in annoyance that a deep line ran up his forehead.

A comb had been taken to his hair, but because of the humidity from the rain, his hair was wavier than usual. It had been tied back with a ribbon, but the ends of his hair had a slight bounce, which Sara couldn’t help but think was a little cute.

His hair may be cute, but his face is very handsome.

She tried to sneak looks at him nonchalantly, knowing that if she stared too

much, he would probably start to feel uncomfortable.

His formal wear, white with a gold decorative pattern, made him look the part of a royal perfectly, even if he was a bit of an odd one. Even with his chin resting on his hands, he couldn't shake the sense of refinement from his appearance. Delightfully handsome attributes could be found all over his body, from his eyes (which were half-lidded grumpily) and his mouth (which only opened to exhale another sigh) to the masculine lines on his neck, which contrasted with his lithe figure.

He always wore white gloves when writing at his desk or drinking tea, but up close, Sara saw that his hands were large and angular. They looked like they could easily wrap around Sara's own.

...She really had meant to look casually, but her body trembled when she caught his green eyes glaring at her.

"What are you doing? Is there something you wanted to say?"

"O-Oh, no, it's not really something to speak of..."

"Just spit it out. You're my wife, so if something I'm wearing seems strange to your tastes, I'll change it. I want to hear your opinion."

"It's..."

She should have finished with "nothing really," but perhaps because she had tried to gloss over his first question so poorly, his eyes bore into hers.

He always wore his mask, so I had no idea...his stare is so intense...

Being stared at by such a handsome man, she felt heat steadily rise to her cheeks. Richard, however, didn't seem like he was about to back down, so she finally resigned herself and looked away.

"It's just...you look very n-nice, Your Highness..."

"...What?"

"Those formal clothes really suit you... And you're very handsome, so...I just got distracted by your good looks."

Richard fell silent.

Sara had been so sure he would be weirded out and ask, “What are you talking about?” but he just narrowed his eyes and watched her as if he were thinking something over. He wasn’t glaring at her anymore, but something felt off as she looked into his slightly melancholy eyes.

“Your Highness?”

“...Thank you.”

“What?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’? You gave me a compliment. Honestly, I’ve never been very concerned about my appearance, but...being complimented by you doesn’t feel so bad. So I said thank you.”

That was unexpected.

I thought he was going to reject the compliment or get annoyed...

But in fact, he didn’t seem all that displeased. His reaction was far from jumping for joy, but he had taken her kind words in stride.

She was at a loss for what to say. Richard’s eyes softened and he slowly looked her up and down.

“And...,” he continued, his voice slightly husky, “you look very nice, too. I recognize the dress as one I got for you, but...did you bring that corsage with you from Saleilles?”

Sara, unfortunately, wasn’t able to respond to him right away. The moment his soft voice had uttered “You look very nice,” her brain had stopped functioning at once.

He had given her the dress she was currently wearing—the design matched his own formal wear—but she had never dreamed he would tell her, with such a gentle expression, “You look nice”!

I’m...I’m so happy...I think...

For a few moments Sara sat there in silence, overwhelmed with emotion, but then she remembered that he had asked about her corsage.

“Oh! That’s— Yes, that’s right. This corsage was a keepsake from my mother.”

“It was your mother’s?”

“It was... Oh!”

She had been so flustered by his unexpected compliment that the words had slipped out before she knew it. Once she realized her mistake, she felt her entire body go pale. The corsage was a keepsake from *Sara’s* mother, the baroness, not *Hermine’s* mother, the queen of Saleilles.

Oh no! Wait...I can still fix this! Just calm down... Keep it together...

As Sara’s mind ran around in circles, she felt Richard looking at her.

By a small stroke of good luck for Sara, Hermine’s mother had passed away from an illness when Hermine was two years old, so Sara could keep calling it a “keepsake” from her mother. The corsage, however, was too cheap to be an accessory owned by the queen, and Hermine herself had once told Sara quite indifferently that she didn’t remember anything about her mother.

It probably wasn’t common for someone to have an attachment to their deceased mother’s belongings when she died before they could form memories of her, but now that Sara had said it, she couldn’t take it back.

I started this, so now I have to see my way through it!

Swallowing the bitter saliva that had pooled in her mouth, she closed her eyes and smiled.

“Yes... I don’t remember my mother, but among all her mementos, this was the one I personally liked the best. And with it being a corsage, I didn’t think it would be a problem if I took it with me to my marital home.”

Sara was impressed with how good of an excuse she had been able to pull out of her hat. When a woman married into a royal or noble family, all of her belongings were to be provided by her husband. Indeed, if she were to be gifted something by anyone else, she couldn’t just wear it so easily. But a memento from her mother wouldn’t have been a problem. A corsage didn’t even have any direct contact with her skin, so no one would look at her sideways for wearing it.

Richard reacted just as Sara thought he would, his eyebrows relaxing in

understanding.

“I see... It’s a very beautiful piece.”

“Thank you,” Sara said. A few giggles escaped her lips.

“What is it?”

“Your face is a lot calmer now, Your Highness. It’s much nicer this way.”

His eyes widened like he had been caught in an ambush. His almond-shaped eyes were usually narrowed, and his face was always grouchy-looking, even in his portrait, so this was a rare sight indeed.

Richard gently pressed his hand against his forehead. He seemed to have only just realized how soft his expression had become.

“It’s true...,” he muttered quietly. “I feel much more relaxed when I’m talking to you... I still don’t want to go to this, though.”

“Then let me know if you get tired, okay? You can head back to the villa, and I can stay and talk with the king.”

“I could never do something that pathetic... I do what needs to be done. And so...let’s get this over with.” A ghost of a smile graced his lips.

“Right. Let’s do it.”

Sara couldn’t help but wish she could stay here with Richard and listen to the sounds of the rain outside instead of venturing out to the main castle.



IF it had been a sunny day, it would have been possible for Sara and Richard to walk from the villa to the main castle, but because it had been raining all day and the ground was muddy, they would be taking a carriage.

The party chatted about their plans for the day during the ride over, but when they disembarked at the front steps of the main castle, their expressions stiffened. Richard got out of the carriage first and reached for Sara as Daniel held out a parasol.

“Your hand.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

In Saleilles, wives got out of the carriage first and opened the door for their husbands, but in Ferrier it seemed to be the other way around.

Nearby, the knights and servants of the main castle were lined up at attention. Before they bowed, Sara went to take hold of Richard's arm and match his step as they climbed the stairs...

That's what she was supposed to do, at least.

"U-Um... Your Highness?"

"Hm?"

"...Is it all right that we're holding each other like this?"

By "holding each other," she meant the way he had tightly gripped her right hand with his left.

I don't think this was the way Claire had taught me to walk...

But Richard just glanced at their hands, looked back up at Sara, and softened his eyes.

"It's fine. Married couples can hold each other however they want. Besides, you're wearing such a beautiful dress today, and if you hold my arm and try to match my pace, you might step on the hem."

"Well, that's true..."

Sara glanced around, but no one was reacting to the two of them holding hands.

Daniel, holding the parasol above her, told her under his breath, "High-ranking nobles and royalty can walk holding hands this way."

If this was a special right of the very privileged, she could understand that. But...

In Saleilles, holding hands like this is called "linking with a lover"...

She felt her cheeks and ears turn pink as she climbed the stairs with Richard.

She had held hands with her father and Hermine before, but that was just a simple clasping of hands—she had only ever seen very intimate and married couples link all five fingers together like this...

Firmin didn't even hold my hand like this... He said it made his fingers too tired.

Sara felt a tinge of annoyance at remembering her ex-boyfriend (though she only had herself to blame for it). Then she looked to her right, however, and her husband's soothing good looks washed away the prickling feeling in her mind.

Maybe holding hands like this wasn't so unusual in Ferrier... But even so, it made her sincerely happy that Richard would consider her dress and ease of movement and then adjust the way he escorted her.

...Sara applied the slightest bit of pressure on his hand.

There was a brief stillness.

Then Richard squeezed her hand back, as if in reply.

Your Highness...

She turned to look at his profile once more. His bright green eyes were looking straight ahead, but the tops of his ears peeking through his slate-gray hair were faintly pink.



ROUGHLY six months before, the Saleilles army had been made to retreat in a battle against the smaller Ferrier forces. The conflict had arisen after Ferrier crowned a new king without the approval of Saleilles.

Saleilles had argued that Ferrier was in the wrong for pushing through the enthronement of the young king purely because there were no other candidates, but this pretext was feeble. Before the previous king had passed away from his illness, it had been his dying wish that the crown prince, Edouard, would become the next king, and Ferrier had simply fulfilled this wish. And more importantly, Ferrier was not some vassal state to Saleilles.

It was an ancient tradition in kingdoms on the continent that, after the death of a monarch, his successor would ascend to the throne only after receiving approval from the monarch of another kingdom. Although a kingdom did have an obligation to report the enthronement in a congress of their neighbors, these days the tradition of receiving approval from another monarch was

nothing more than a formality—raising an objection against it was nonsense.

Sara suspected that after the sudden death of the last king, Saleilles had realized the crown prince of Ferrier was still young and decided to try to make Ferrier a vassal state.

The people of Saleilles were terrified of abilities, but if the king made Ferrier a vassal state, the threat would be neutralized. Instead, the king of Saleilles likely wanted to exploit the people of Ferrier for his own convenience.

But Edouard had refuted the accusation, and when they declared war, he had boldly opposed them. Then, after his victory, Edouard had signed a mutual nonaggression pact under the condition that the princess of Saleilles would marry into his family as a hostage.

But Saleilles didn't send the real princess... They sent me, her body double. If they ever found that out...I'd be killed. And this time, they would cause a bloodbath in Saleilles.

Sara and Richard were waiting in the reception room to meet the king, but now, as Sara felt the weight of her duplicitous character, she balled her hands into fists on her knees.

“...Are you all right?”

“...What?”

She looked up at the voice—Richard sat beside her, eyebrows furrowed in concern. He was looking at Sara with worry in his eyes.

They were sitting about a hand's width apart, and at such close proximity, he seemed to notice Sara's hands shaking.

“You're trembling... The rain's still coming down. If you're cold, we can get you a quilt.”

“N-No, I'm not cold. I'm...nervous.”

“About meeting Edouard? It'll be fine. Unlike me, my younger brother is very sociable, an excellent conversationalist, and a pretty nice guy. He's the type of guy who jots little notes in official documents asking me to tell him about you, so don't be nervous.”

“I think you’re plenty nice, too, you know,” Sara quipped. She knew he was talking about the king, but she thought Richard was being a little too self-deprecating. Richard looked away awkwardly.

“We’re not talking about me right now... Anyway, Edouard is very concerned about you. His onslaught of questions might get annoying... If he says something that makes you frightened or hurts you, I will raise an objection, of course.”

The silence of the room was broken by sudden, jubilant laughter. Sara jumped in surprise and grabbed Richard’s arm impulsively.

“Hahaha! What’s this, then? Brother, you’re getting along marvelously with your wife!”

The door opening had utterly slipped their notice, and in came a young man with soft silver hair. He wore an elegant coat the color of caramel, his green eyes were narrowed like those of a child who’d stumbled upon something amusing, and he had a bright smile on his face.

If Richard was the moon, this young man was the sun. They had the same hereditary grayness to their hair and the same green eyes. Even though they had the same father, their dispositions couldn’t have been more different.

Edouard watched Sara, who was still clinging to Richard’s arm, and Richard himself, who was looking back with a fixed stare. Edouard chuckled again.

“Well, my greetings are quite belated, aren’t they, Princess? I’m enchanted to meet you, Princess Hermine. I’m Edouard, younger brother of Richard over there and the king of Ferrier.”

Sara and Richard rose to greet the king.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I’m Hermine, from Saleilles.”

“Oh my...! You have such an adorable voice! I’m so jealous of you, Richard... You get to live with such a cute princess for the rest of your life!” King Edouard teased, lobbing an arm up on Richard’s shoulder.

Richard’s eyes were narrowed in annoyance as he shoved Edouard’s chest.

“Stop gushing in front of my wife... As you can see, this is what my brother’s like, so you can just be yourself around him. Also...would you mind letting go of

my arm?”

Sara suddenly realized she had been holding onto Richard’s arm this whole time.

“Oh! Right. Sorry.”

“Don’t be like that, Richard! I bet you really wanted her to hold on a bit longer, eh?”

“Stop joking around. Skies above... I know this is the backlash from you having to be so well-behaved in front of everyone else, but you’re getting way too relaxed just because I’m here,” Richard offered candidly. He sat back down with Sara and crossed his legs.

The king, however, taking a seat on the sofa opposite them, did not look chastised at all. He smiled and waved a hand.

“It’s fine! I’m only like this in front of family. Oh! But that reminds me... Princess Hermine is part of the family now, too, isn’t she? I can call you my sister now, right?”

“Um... Yes, if it pleases Your Majesty.”

“Thanks! Right... This is quite late, but...congratulations on your nuptials, you two.”

Edouard said it in such a ceremonious manner that Sara, who couldn’t totally wrap her head around how formal to be in the presence of the king, sat up straighter and bowed alongside Richard.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Sara replied.

“Thank you,” said Richard.

“Don’t mention it... It’s sort of weird, isn’t it? I’m the whole reason you two got married, even though it was to keep Saleilles in check.”

Edouard crossed his arms and laughed a little awkwardly. Sara looked up at him and slowly shook her head.

“I don’t see it that way. I came to Ferrier fully aware that I would be taking responsibility for my father’s decision to cause so much bloodshed and that I

would devote myself to building a relationship with Ferrier based on mutual trust. And you have allowed me to live in the royal villa without any discomfort or inconvenience. I am deeply appreciative for your thoughtfulness, Your Majesty.”

A perverse urge to laugh crept up Sara’s throat as she uttered such barefaced lies. The “father” who had started that pointless war was *not* Sara’s father, and the king of Saleilles had betrayed Ferrier by sending Sara in his daughter’s place to protect her.

If the truth got out, Sara would certainly be executed.

And if that happened, so many innocent people would get caught up in a retaliation much worse than when Saleilles had lost the war...

Whether or not Edouard knew the dark thoughts that plagued Sara’s mind, he nodded as if her response hadn’t surprise him.

“You’re very welcome. However...just because you came here doesn’t mean that war has been totally washed away. We may have driven out the Saleilles army with our elite mutants, but we, too, suffered casualties. People died. It was Saleilles that started the war by objecting to my ascension as king—and that can never be forgotten.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Of course, I know that as a sheltered princess, you were not involved in your kingdom’s politics. I also know that your older brother had been relegated to some backwoods region. The king and his prime minister were the ones responsible for sending troops to march on Ferrier. However, given that you are a hostage here, I’ll have to keep an eye on yo— Okay, hold on now, Richard. Could you stop looking at me like you want to kill me?”

“If you already know all that, then stop tormenting my wife,” Richard growled.

Sara, who had resigned herself to accepting the king’s speech, turned to her husband in surprise. She had assumed he had just been listening to his brother quietly, but displeasure was written all over his face. Richard channeled his irritation by drumming his fingertips against his knee. His words finally clicked in

Sara's head.

Did the prince...get angry on my behalf...?

Sara didn't even realize she was staring at him until Richard, noticing her gaze, turned toward her. When their eyes met, his lips turned downward and he cleared his throat, embarrassed.

"...My wife fully understands her responsibilities and attends to me with the utmost sincerity. And I... At first, I thought she was being forced into doing troublesome tasks, but...she's a very good wife. No matter how much of a say you had in orchestrating this marriage, Edouard, I won't let you carry on with these senseless verbal attacks."

"Your Highness..." Sara said emotionally.

"I'm sorry... If you ignore this side of him, he's really a very good brother," Richard said to her.

"It's fine. As the king of Ferrier, it's only natural for him to feel wary toward me. I'm okay, Your Highness." Sara reached out to touch Richard's left arm as she spoke, vaguely wondering if he would let her.

His upper arm was hard, tensed in frustration at his younger brother. But as soon as Sara's hand made contact with him, his arm suddenly relaxed and the hard line between his eyebrows became a faint impression.

"You're very brave..." Richard said softly to Sara. "But you needn't force yourself in my presence." Then he turned toward his brother. "My wife may forgive you, but don't get too cocky."

"You got it. Haha! It's been a while since you've lectured me, huh? Are you that attached to your wife?"

"Edouard..."

"All right, all right... Well, as long as you two are doing well, that's enough for me." Then the king looked at Sara and pointed behind himself with a thumb. "I just wanted to get introductions out of the way today, but I have something I'd like to talk to my brother about, so would you mind giving us a moment alone, dear sister?"

“Of course.”

Richard so rarely came to the main castle, after all, so surely there was business they had to discuss.

“Thanks. You can go relax in the next room over while you’re waiting. I’ll call for you when we’re finished,” Edouard said.

“All right.”

At Daniel’s prompting, who had been waiting at the back of the room, Sara stood—and she suddenly felt eyes on her. She turned and saw Richard staring at her. It might have been her imagination, but...she could have sworn she sensed sadness in his gaze.

It almost looked like he was pouting that she had to leave him.

Adorable.

The word had popped into her head before she knew it.

Sara chuckled and put a hand on Richard’s shoulder.

“I’ll just be gone for a little bit. Take your time talking with your brother, okay?”

“...Sure.”

His voice sounded morose, but his expression softened somewhat, which put Sara’s mind at ease.

Maybe he is concerned about me, after all...

If that were true, Sara would be thrilled.



EDOUARD watched the princess’s long, blonde hair sway as she and Daniel left the room. When he turned back, he saw that his half brother was still watching the door wistfully. Edouard tried to stifle his laugh but was unsuccessful.

“...What?”

“I’m glad! I never thought you’d be so attached to your wife.”

“...I told you not to joke around,” Richard grumbled irritably.

But this was the two brothers’ own way of communicating. Ever since they had understood their respective domains, they simply tried to treat each other as family.

These moments were precious for both of them. Edouard, who had been crowned king at age fifteen, could let his guard down and lean on another person, and Richard, who didn’t trust others, could express his feelings honestly with someone else.

Suddenly, Edouard’s smile vanished, and he lowered his voice so that the princess in the next room would not be able to overhear.

“Brother... You haven’t told Hermine, have you?”

Richard’s face tensed again. He nodded stiffly. “Right. I haven’t told her... And I don’t plan to.”

“Okay.”

“...But she has a sharp nose, and she’s very perceptive,” he added.

“A sharp nose...? Hermine’s not a dog!” said Edouard, laughing in surprise, but the nervousness didn’t vanish from his eyes. “But she doesn’t seem terribly prejudiced against abilities, so she might be *surprised* to know the truth about you, but she wouldn’t hate you, just as she doesn’t hate the others. In reality, you’ve helped us countless times with your power. Everyone should be able to understand that... And you still want to hide it?”

“Yes,” Richard grumbled. “I don’t want to get hurt, or hurt anyone else...”

Edouard’s face sank sadly.

“I see. I know I’ve teased you about it a lot, but Hermine really *does* mean a lot to you, doesn’t she?”

“I never thought she’d be so friendly and cheerful. I want to confide in her, but telling her might make her leave... So I can’t.”

“Right. I can respect that. I think doing what you want to do is the best course.” Edouard smiled, looking at his half brother with eyes full of affection. “Both Mother and I are very grateful for you. For all the official business you

help out with every day, of course...but for what you did fifteen years ago, too.”

“.....”

“If you really like Hermine and want to preserve the delicate relationship you have with her now, I’ll respect your feelings. If you want to live happily together with her, I will create a world where you can do that.”

“Edouard... I appreciate that, but you are the king. Don’t forget your responsibilities, not that I think you ever would. And if there’s anything I can do to help you, I will.”

Edouard smiled at Richard’s mildly preaching tone.

Edouard wanted to repay his debt to his brother, but all Richard wanted was to help him.

They may have had different mothers, but the two brothers were probably more similar than met the eye.

“Thank you, Richard. I won’t let my guard down with Saleilles, but you be careful, too. With Hermine as well, of course.”

Richard gave him a questioning look, but Edouard just gave him a cryptic smile in return.



AS the king and Richard were speaking in hushed voices to each other, Sara was resting in the next room with a cup of tea made by one of the castle’s maids.

“It’s delicious,” Sara said to herself.

The maid had only stayed to prepare the tea and then quietly left afterward. Even Daniel had told her, “I’ll be waiting out in the hallway.” So Sara was left all alone in the small reception room.

She thought of the room as “small” because it wasn’t quite as large as the room she’d spoken to the king in, but she felt quite at ease. The ornaments that decorated the shelves, the paintings depicting fruits, the chandelier with so many flickering flames it looked like it was wrapped in countless stars... All the room’s furnishings were to her liking, so she felt very comfortable there.

All things considered, the king may have been a little different from what I thought he would be, but he and Richard seem to be very close, so I'm glad they got the chance to see each other.

Sara had been at a loss for words when he had questioned her so directly and bluntly, but as the king, he had every right to be wary of her. Above all else, however, was the fact that Richard had immediately spoken up for her, irritated on Sara's behalf, which had made her indescribably happy.

The memory of Richard growling "stop tormenting my wife" in a low voice was playing on repeat in Sara's head. Her cheeks suddenly flashed red-hot.

He never called Sara by name. He always addressed her directly as "you," and to other people as "my wife."

Sara had never objected. Richard probably had his own reasons why, and to be honest, she was grateful for it.

If he called me "Hermine," I would feel like the body double I really am... But when he says "you," it seems like he's just addressing me...

She knew the pleasure she derived from this was probably foolish and childish. But she really liked the way he sounded and how he looked at her when he said "you."

Sara was absentmindedly thinking about Richard in his formal clothes when the windows rattled a bit from the wind, snapping her back to reality.

What on earth am I daydreaming for?! I'm a fake princess in a political marriage with a prince—this is no time to start getting the wrong idea!

If (and that was a big "if") Richard *did* start liking Sara, it didn't change the fact that she was deceiving him. But still...if he started calling her Hermine, her heart might shatter into a million pieces.

Ugh... My head is spinning... I wonder if I can step outside...

Sara glanced out the window. Luckily, the drizzle had stopped. Despite the stubborn gray sky, it didn't look like she had to worry about getting caught in any rain if she stepped outside.

She pushed open the glass door to the damp terrace and stepped outside,

trying to avoid the steadily dripping water coming from the roof as she went.

The handrail was soaking wet. It looked like she could only stay dry standing near the glass doors.

The air after the rain was clear and smelled just like it did after weeds had been pulled—like earth and mud.

The humidity gave her skin a sheen of moisture.

But the prince said he didn't like the humidity because it made his hair curl up.

She remembered Richard's face when he had muttered that to her... Sara had come outside to clear her head, but she started to feel her cheeks warm up again.

I suppose the prince just makes me feel this flustered...

When Sara had dated Firmin, she had never remembered him from time to time like this—his face and words had never popped into her head. She had been with Firmin much longer than she had been married to Richard, so why was there such a difference?

As Sara absentmindedly looked down at the peaceful, wet garden, she heard a door opening from below her and then several female voices.

"Oh! The rain's stopped."

"Keep the door open—there's a nice breeze coming in."

Some young women were chatting in the room directly below her.

Now that she thought of it, Sara remembered there were several game rooms and lounges in the castle where aristocrats could mingle with one another.

As Sara stood on the terrace, the women's voices were carried up to her on the humid breeze.

"So, what were you talking about, again?"

"The prince, the prince! The recluse of the royal villa! I've heard he's in the castle as we speak, on one of his rare visits!"

Sara couldn't believe she was hearing people gossip about Richard the moment she came outside...

She could have turned around and gone back inside the room, but unable to suppress the bubbling curiosity in her chest, she quieted her breath and strained her ears to hear the women's conversation.

"It seems so. I heard the king ordered him to bring his wife along, too."

"His wife... That's the princess of Saleilles, right?"

"That's right. I've never seen her myself, but the servants at the villa say she's a lovely, charming woman. But even so, I can't imagine being the prince's consort... She may be from Saleilles, but I feel sorry for the poor girl."

Sara pursed her lips in frustration (although as an eavesdropper, she didn't have much room to judge the ladies).

She had no clue what rumors the servants from the villa were spreading, but she was more concerned that they were speaking ill of Richard than pleased that they were praising her.

No matter how much of a recluse he is, that was quite a thing to say about a prince of your own kingdom...

One of the women below seemed to share Sara's thoughts on the matter.

"Don't say that! His Highness has had a hard lot in life, too, you know."

"That's true... It all happened before we were old enough to know what was going on, but the prince's mother was apparently quite a difficult woman."

"I heard she found out the prince wasn't a mutant and became weirdly obsessed with him... And if that's true, we should save some of our pity for the prince."

I see... So that's how people see Richard...

Daniel had said that it was very likely Richard wasn't a mutant, and Claire had said that Richard's late mother had shut herself away with him.

The royal concubine had probably snapped from the shock of learning that her son, who she had hoped to become king, didn't have an ability.

But listening any more to this would just be tasteless.

They were just rumors, after all. Sara couldn't let them make her lose sight of

the Richard she knew.

Just as she thought this, she turned and started to walk away—until one voice stopped her in her tracks.

“I wonder if the rumor’s true...that the royal concubine was so restrictive with the prince, she was punished by the Black Beast.”

“Many people think so, though they cannot say so openly... I heard the Black Beast also made an appearance at the battle against Saleilles six months ago, and that it just recently appeared in one of the suburbs and executed a wanted criminal.”

“The royal concubine’s body had been found badly injured, right? Almost like she had been attacked by an animal...”

Sara suspected the aforementioned “Black Beast” probably had something to do with the abilities she’d so frequently heard about—but if she continued listened to these women, her own judgment might become clouded.

Sara quietly walked back inside, shut the door, and went to the table. She touched the teapot—the tea inside had become totally cold.

Your Highness...

Richard... Son of a concubine. Older brother to the king. A man who likely didn’t have any special powers.

Sara couldn’t even begin to imagine what his early childhood was like.

His own mother, killed by the Black Beast after forcing Richard into confinement...

The emotions Richard had felt must have been well beyond simple anguish or sadness.

It probably wasn’t a topic Sara could easily broach.

Just as she took a steadying breath, there was a knock at the door. Daniel poked his head in and announced, “The king and the prince have finished talking. I’m sorry to interrupt you while you’re enjoying your tea, but we’ll be going home soon.”

“Okay,” Sara replied. She rose from her seat, feeling regretful that she had let the tea go cold.

She would return to the villa with Richard. She hoped her face wouldn’t give away that something was amiss.

As she left the small reception room with Daniel, the women below continued to gossip, completely unaware that Richard’s new wife had been eavesdropping on them.

“The Black Beast... Is it really an ability?”

“I have no idea. The rumor goes that it only appears at night, and then it leaves like the wind, bathed in the blood of the criminals it’s killed...”

“I’m glad it gets rid of evil people, but I hope it doesn’t come anywhere near the royal capital!”



AS Sara felt the morning sun streaming through the curtains, she stirred in bed before opening her eyes.

I’ve been able to fall asleep really well lately.

It wasn’t as if she were typically prone to insomnia, but lately she’d been going to sleep almost immediately at night and then waking up the next morning feeling completely refreshed. She was sure this was a result of the fruit tea Claire had been making her before bed recently.

The tea was packed with juicy fruits native to Ferrier that Sara was unfamiliar with. It was the perfect balance of sweet, sour, and refreshing. She loved it because even if she drank it right before bed, it didn’t make her stomach feel heavy or leave any excessive lingering sweetness in her mouth.

I wonder if the prince is still asleep this morning...

She didn’t hear a peep from the next room. Maybe he had gone out with Daniel again last night.

Recently, it seemed Richard had been going out for walks at night more frequently, and he only woke up before lunchtime around once every three days. Sara, however, decided not to pry into his business, so she never probed

him about it. She simply tried to wish him “good morning” the first time they met during the day, and “good night” before she herself went to sleep.

I wonder if he’s getting enough rest...

Maybe it was Richard who needed the fruit tea, not Sara.

She brought this up with Claire when the maid was helping Sara change clothes. Claire grinned and ran a comb through Sara’s hair.

“Perhaps so. His Highness has always been a night owl and absolutely awful at getting up in the morning.”

“The fruit tea probably won’t help him sleep if he drinks it during the day, will it?”

“That’s right. It only works if you drink one cup right before bed. If he had it too early in the day, he’d just get sleepy during his work, and it’s not particularly good to drink a lot of it.”

“I think it would be nice to have an evening teatime with the prince someday, but that would probably be difficult...,” Sara murmured.

She heard a gasp from behind her.

She turned and saw Claire looking down at her, her expression calm but her eyes widened slightly.

“No... I’m sure you’ll be able to one day! Even though His Highness is very busy right now...he might even invite you to his bedchamber someday.”

Sara laughed at Claire’s unexpected comedic side. “That will never happen!” she replied, smiling back at her.

Compared with their first day as an officially married couple, Sara and Richard had gotten much closer, but she could still only have a proper conversation with him once a day over tea. They hadn’t even shared a meal together.

Even then, their teatime conversation was heavily one-sided, with Richard often only interjecting short phrases like “Really?” and “I see.” If in the future he ever did introduce a topic of his own accord, Sara’s predominant emotion would likely be not happiness but shock.

The door connecting their bedrooms had remained resolutely closed. Sara would probably never see that door open for as long as she lived in this room.

The prince hated being bothered and unnecessary interactions with other people, so he would never invite Sara into his private space, a place where he could feel at ease... Definitely not.

“Anyway... I wanted to wish His Highness good morning, so could you tell me when he wakes up? I’ll just be reading until then.”

“Understood, ma’am. Daniel should be reporting for work soon, so I’ll let him know, too.”

Sara felt relieved and glanced once more at the white door.



DANIEL came in later, just as Sara was in the middle of reading a book about abilities.

“Good morning, Hermine. His Highness is all ready, so would you be kind enough to bring him his tea again today?”

“Yes, of course. Oh! That’s right. Is everything ready, Claire?”

“Yep, it’s perfect!”

Sara looked back and saw Claire smiling and giving her the “okay” hand sign. On the table in front of her were the usual tea utensils, along with a glass bowl filled with cut-up fruit.

The fruit tea Sara always drank before bed was not suitable for daytime, so she decided to make a different one for Richard. She was good at brewing tea leaves, but she wasn’t used to making tea by steeping fruit in hot water.

She hoped she could prepare the drink in front of him—with pointers from Claire—and then give him a cup of tea that would provide him energy to carry on with his work for the day.

I hope it will make him happy... Well, maybe I can’t hope for that much...

Claire had told her that Richard had never tried anything presented to him by someone other than a servant at the villa. Sara should probably just be grateful

if he didn't throw up his guard and simply accepted the tea she offered him.

Even so, Sara walked with a spring in her step as she loaded everything onto the trolley and rolled it to Richard's study. She almost even started humming to herself, but she knew that wasn't very ladylike, so she resisted the urge.

"Good morning, Your Highness," said Sara, knocking at the study door. "It's Hermine."

His reply came immediately.

"Yes, good morning. Come in."

Sara felt even more elated when she heard him speaking in a normal tone of voice—it was so different from the clearly annoyed one he had used at the start of their marriage.

Today's shaping up to be a good day! Huh?

Just as Sara buoyantly crossed the threshold into the study, her nose was hit with something so smelly she blinked in surprise.

Richard's study was thoroughly cleaned every day, and Richard decorated the walls with the handmade scented sachets the queen mother regularly gave him, so there was always a faint but nice smell in there. But today, a pungent stink wafted around the room from seemingly nowhere.

Sara uneasily looked around for the source of the truly awful smell.

Is this...that animal smell again? There's another odor mixed in, too...

"What's wrong?"

Sara jumped and quickly looked forward.

Richard, who was again wearing the mask that only exposed the lower half of his face, looked at her curiously—or so it seemed, at least. From what she could see, he still looked slightly groggy after waking up, but it didn't seem like there was anything different about him.

"No, it's nothing..."

"Then please prepare the tea. Is that fruit for eating?"

"Oh, no. Today I was thinking of preparing a fruit tea, with Claire's help..."

Unless you'd like to eat some of them?"

"I would. Just a few. Could I have two lunes?"

"Of course."

Lunes were glossy, emerald-green fruits roughly a thumb's width in diameter. The thin outer skin was peeled before eating. If you cut the skin at the tip with a knife, you could easily peel off the rest.

Sara borrowed the knife from Claire, picked two of the largest and prettiest lunes from the bunch, and began peeling them.

"I'll bring them to you."

Sara put the peeled lunes on a plate, gathered up a fork, and walked over to the desk—but then she froze.

The smell got stronger...?!

The animal smell was unlike that of a normal cat or dog, and the other odor was like iron—it was the stench of blood.

She tightly gripped the plate, which had been on the verge of falling to the floor. Her eyes widened as she stared at the source of the smell—Richard.

Likely confused at why she had stopped in her tracks with the plate in her hands, the prince stopped writing and looked up.

"...What's the matter?"

His hair had rustled slightly at the movement—the smell of blood became stronger.

"Y-Your Highness!"

"Wh-What is it?!"

"Are you...injured somewhere?" she asked daringly.

But he just looked back at her with a stunned look of surprise.

"Am I injured...?"

It certainly didn't seem so, or that something was physically wrong with him, but Sara trusted her nose and her intuition.

She put down the plate of lunes on the desk and continued looking at Richard, both hands clasped over her chest.

“I’m not injured anywhere... Why would you ask that all of a sudden?”

“It’s just... I smell blood coming off you, Your Highness.”

“What...?”

Sara could tell that, behind his mask, Richard’s eyes had widened as far as they could go.

“And there’s an animal smell, too... Were you attacked by a wild animal or someth—”

BANG!

The desk made a terrible noise as Richard slammed it and got to his feet. Sara hadn’t even been able to finish the question.

The force of the impact had jostled the plate. The lunes rolled off the plate and onto the desk, then fell and squashed onto the floor. Book and documents that been precariously stacked on the desk had slipped off, too, the pages flapping noisily on their way down.

Sara couldn’t utter a word. Richard’s lips were twisted in anger, his canines visible as he gnashed his teeth.

Maybe he was right to always wear a mask...

Sara was sure that the gaze he was fixing on her was full of loathing and fury.

“Your...Highness...?”

“Get out.”

“I-I’m—so sorry—I said too mu—”

“If you know that, then get out!”

His voice was like a growl.

No...he *really* growled.

The air in the study shifted. Sara felt goose bumps blooming across her skin, like she had been seized by a chill.

The smell of the beast grew thicker.

It was hard to breathe. Without knowing why, she felt tears spring to her eyes.

What's...going on?

She couldn't say anything.

Richard's hands had not moved from where they had pounded the desk. They began to tremble—the veins on the back of his hands started bulging. His head was slumped forward, his breath coming out in rough wheezes. Claire, who had been as shell-shocked as Sara, now ran forward and pulled at Sara's arm.

"Hermine! This way! Daniel...!" she cried in the direction of the door.

But Daniel, who seemed to have sensed that something was amiss, was already barging into the study.

The next thing Sara knew, she was floating in the air, drifting toward Daniel. He had used his ability to pull her away from Richard.

Sara's mind was totally blank. As Daniel held her protectively, her lips began to tremble.

"D-Daniel..."

"This way!"

Before she even had the chance to respond, Daniel dashed out of the study with Sara in his arms. He continued running through the foyer and out to the hallway.

It was there that Sara was finally able to break through the suffocating feeling in her chest. She slumped down on the floor and coughed.

"I-I'm sorry. Daniel, back there—"

"Please... Please don't say anything."

When she heard the entreaty in Daniel's voice, Sara swallowed her words.

Daniel's uniform, which was always so crisp and smart, was now crumpled and disheveled. Even his hair was ruffled.

He looked down at her with pain in his eyes and started helping her up.

“His Highness has been suffering for a long time... I understand that you want to ask all sorts of questions, but right now...”

Unable to say anything else, Sara closed her mouth.

When she shut her eyes, what came to her mind was not the low roar Richard had uttered but, for some reason, the image of the crushed lilies on the floor.



IT was very late at night.

She heard a low voice, followed by the sound of a closet being opened and closed. Sara slipped out of bed.

Putting on only her slippers and leaving her bedroom, she saw Claire standing in the middle of the living room, as if she had been waiting for her.

It was strange seeing Claire here this late—normally she would go back to her own room at night.

“Claire...”

“Princess Hermine... I’m very sorry, but I’ve been told not to let you leave.”

“I understand... His Highness is going out, isn’t he? I want to tell him good night,” said Sara in a firm voice.

Claire grimaced. But she didn’t seem displeased at Sara’s words—rather, she looked at her with pity, as if she were pained by her determination.

“I don’t recommend doing that.”

“I know. But I haven’t wished him good night yet tonight. That’s all I’ll say.”

“.....”

Faced with this refusal to back down, Claire eventually caved and dressed Sara in only a dressing gown.

Sara thanked her and, after pausing at the door for just a moment, went out into the foyer when she heard the door to the study open.

Richard stepped out of his study and into the dim light of the foyer. When

Sara saw him, tears spilled from the outer corners of her eyes.

He wore black clothes and a mask that covered his entire face. His breath seemed to catch when he first saw her standing there. After a stretch of silence, she heard his muffled voice.

“Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know... When I saw you there, I just started crying for some reason.”

“.....”

“...Good night, Your Highness. I eagerly await your return.”

Having accomplished her goal, Sara had just been about to return to her room when he called out to her.

“You...”

When she looked back, she saw Richard standing there, both hands clenched into tight fists.

“...You’ve already realized, haven’t you?”

Sara didn’t respond.

“...I will call you to my room tomorrow night. Don’t leave your room until then.”

If it were any other time, he would have told her in a soft voice, “Please don’t leave.” Now, however, his tone was so commanding that a chill of sadness spread through Sara’s chest.

But it was easy to see that he was hurting terribly, too. Sara meekly nodded and curtsied.

“...I understand.”

Richard didn’t say anything in return. He left with a swish of his coattails, and Sara caught a whiff of a scented sachet coming off him.



THE next day, Sara followed Richard’s orders and never left her room except to go to the bathroom.

Claire, who would usually pass the time idly chatting with her, was silent the entire day and had a vaguely grave look on her face.

It seemed that Richard had come back to the villa at dawn and slept until after noon again. Sara didn't bring him his daily tea, of course. Daniel attended to Richard throughout the day. The prince and his wife didn't speak to one another all day, persistently divided by the wall between them.

And then it was night...

"Claire," Sara chided in a whisper, "I'm being invited to His Highness's room to *talk*."

Sara was wearing only a chemise.

But Claire was being uncharacteristically stubborn and handed her a thin negligee.

"His Highness is inviting you to his bedroom—you have to wear appropriate clothing."

Claire said it so matter-of-factly that Sara just closed her mouth and went along with it as Claire dressed her and did her makeup. It was the first time Sara had ever gotten her makeup done before bed.

I bet Claire's thinking, "I never thought she'd be invited to his bedroom like this."

After Sara had finished getting ready, she waited in her room for a little while. She heard the sound of the white door being unlocked from the other side, and then the door opened.

Daniel stood in the doorway.

"This way, Your Highness," he said rather stiffly.

Sara parted with Claire and entered the prince's chambers alone.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that Sara had thought this door would never be opened.

She knew it was not the time to be thinking such things, but a sad smile slipped out, nevertheless. With sorrowful eyes, Daniel led her over to sit on

Richard's bed, bowed, and then silently took his leave.

When Daniel shut the white door behind him, Sara was left all alone in Richard's bedroom.

What's going to happen to me...?

Strangely, she didn't feel nervous or frightened—only empty and sad.

Richard would probably never forgive her for alluding to his "truth."

She was never the bride he wanted. And Ferrier had come out on top of the battle with Saleilles, so it would be easy enough for Ferrier to get rid of a troublesome hostage like her.

And she wasn't even the real princess...

Even if she were executed in Ferrier, the king of Saleilles wouldn't feel a thing—he would just start devising a plan for his next attack. Even Hermine might say a passing "Oh, poor thing..." before never thinking of Sara again.

As Sara pondered these inevitabilities with a hollow heart, the door leading to the foyer opened.

Richard stood with a soft light illuminating him from behind. He was dressed lightly. Even his nightclothes were dark—likely a personal preference on his part. Even so, the prince was still wearing a mask, and all Sara could see of his face were his unreadable thin lips.

After he shut the door, he strode across the room until he faced Sara. She looked up at him. His lips were a tight line—he was uncomfortable.

"Hermine Maria Saleilles..." he said, using Hermine's full maiden name.

"Yes?" she replied meekly.

Then, suddenly, he grabbed a hold of her right arm and her world turned upside down.

"Wha—?!" she yelped involuntarily as her body lurched backward, but she was softly caught by the bedsheets.

But Richard still had a hold on her, and before she knew what was happening, he had pinned her down and hitched his right leg up onto the bed, covering her

with his body as if he were caging her there.

Richard leaned in. His white mask was just a foot away from her face. There was an unidentifiable flame in the green eyes that peered out from the eyeholes of the mask.

“Your Highness...”

“You won’t refuse me?”

Despite the situation they were in, his voice was unexpectedly tender. But there was also a sadness and a weariness he couldn’t conceal. Sara felt her eyes getting warmer and warmer.

“If that’s what you want, Your Highness.”

“...If you’re sad enough that you’re about to cry, shouldn’t you refuse? Shouldn’t you call me a monster? Shouldn’t you shout at me, tell me I’m hideous?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said, shaking her head.

Richard let out a hiss of disbelief.

It was so unlike him—he was usually so elegantly languid in both word and deed. But Sara’s eyes only widened in surprise for a fraction of a second—he suddenly grabbed the collar of her nightdress, and in the blink of an eye, he untied the dainty ribbon holding her negligee closed. Sara gasped.

The ribbon came undone, loosening the fabric and exposing her neck and collarbones.

Richard reached up and touched the exposed skin there. He traced her veins with the pad of his thumb.

Sara shivered at the strange sensation. She wasn’t sure how he interpreted that—he huffed, his lips twisting into a mocking smile.

“Your neck is so thin... If I had claws, I could probably cut it open in less than a second.”

That’s probably true, a voice agreed calmly in the back of Sara’s mind. *Because Richard’s a—*

Suddenly, the air around him shifted. The same invisible presence Sara had felt in the study the day before filled the bedroom. Richard's grip on her throat tightened.

But there was more than that—she felt his *nails* growing. Sharp, pointed claws dug into her skin. It hurt, and she could hardly breathe—her face screwed up in pain.

“Your—Highness...”

Sara saw it then: as the prince looked down at her, his bright green eyes were gripped with so much pain and misery, they darted back and forth. In that moment, despite the fact that he had power over her life, his lips pressed together and trembled.

So she placed her free hand over the hand around her neck and shook her head as much as she was able.

“Don’t...do this...Your Highness.”

“...Begging for your life?”

“Yes, but...if you...do this...you will...just suffer.”

“.....”

Sara didn't want to die. There was no denying it.

But there was more to it than that. Richard was in so much pain... She couldn't leave him all alone in this world. If he had gleefully tormented her or given in to his anger and struck her, she would have begged for her life and fought against him with everything she had.

But he was so wretched, she couldn't raise her voice against him, even with his hand around her neck.

All she could feel was sadness. She wanted to cry. Her life was in his hands, but she couldn't even hate him.

She had no idea if her words got through to him, but his grip loosened by a fraction. His other hand let go of her arm and instead grabbed at the bedsheets.

“Aren't you...scared of me?”

“I am scared. But you’re not the only one I fear.”

“.....”

“I’m not scared...because of you... I’m scared of everyone...who has a powerful ability...or a weapon... Not just you...in particular.”

She heard a quiet gasp.

He seemed to falter. His hand started to shake, and she briefly felt a claw graze the back of her neck.

Slowly, he let go of her.

Sara’s breath came out fast and shallow, now that she was finally able to breathe properly again. Richard let out a quiet *tch* again before lapsing into silence.

“...Your Highness?”

“You’ve already figured it out, haven’t you? My...ability.”

Sara hesitated for a moment, but then nodded.

She had overheard the rumors at the castle.

She knew that Richard went out every night.

She had identified the blood and animal smells wafting off him.

And...

She had seen him transforming back in the study.

“Your ability is the power to transform into a jet-black beast... And you use that power to fight against those who would harm your kingdom...right?”

“I’m not the knight in shining armor you’re describing. When I give in to my anger, I transform into a killing monster driven only by emotion.”

Based on Richard’s response, Sara’s conclusion had been right.

At the castle, she had heard the rumors about the Black Beast. That the creature had appeared out of nowhere during the battle against Saleilles, fought alongside the other mutants, and annihilated Saleilles’s forces. The other rumor was that the Black Beast attacked people who would do harm to the

kingdom.

But that wasn't all of it...

If those rumors are true, then when the prince was a child, he...

Sara quietly looked up at him. He made a startled noise in the back of his throat, which then transformed into stifled laughter.

"Yeah... That's right. I'm a monster. I don't just kill criminals and Saleilles troops. I've...I've even killed my own mother with this cursed power."

So it was true, Sara thought, looking down.

Richard's birth mother, the royal concubine, was not punished by the Black Beast for being too severe with her son's confinement... She was killed by her son, who had transformed into the beast.

Which meant the previous king and the queen mother had probably muddled and covered up the murder case to conceal the fact that the prince had killed his own mother.

"Do the queen mother and the king know about your power, too?" Sara asked, fully prepared to be brushed off or told to shut up. But Richard just nodded, surprisingly docile.

"Of course... The first time I transformed, I was two years old. You seem to be desensitized to abilities, but even in Ferrier, a kingdom where so many of us have all sorts of abilities, a power like mine—a power that transforms one's own body—has been abhorred for many, many years. Long ago, it was common for parents to kill their own children if they developed an ability like this," Richard explained, his tone completely detached.

Sara briefly exhaled. One of the books she had borrowed had mentioned that. The power to transform one's body was an incredibly rare ability, but there were many historical precedents of these mutants going berserk and destroying entire towns or causing national emergencies.

That was why if parents had a child with an ability like this, most of them killed the children while they were still young or else locked them away for their entire lives. Many aristocrats, needing an heir to inherit the title, would

mercilessly kill their children for this, even if they were the offspring of their lawful wives.

“My mother... She was never very strong-minded, but when she found out about my ability, she went from bad to worse. She believed that if I became the next king, she would supersede the queen and become the queen mother.”

“What did the former king think?”

“My father? He didn’t seem to find my powers too heretical, but my mother worried herself in circles and shut herself away with me in a villa... And so, she raised me there, one day shouting at me that I was cursed and that I should die, the next day lavishing praise on me and saying that I would become king, that I was such a wonderful son...”

Sara’s parents had always been gentle and even-keeled. She couldn’t begin to imagine growing up like that.

The royal concubine had hated her son for his abominable power. But she had also loved him for the royal blood in his veins.

At any given moment, she had wanted to both kill him and shower him with affection. At that time, the royal concubine’s mind had probably snapped beyond repair.

Sara had been listening to Richard’s story quietly, but she suddenly gasped. When Richard was young, his mother could have truly believed that he would one day become king, even with his cursed power.

But what about a few years later, when the queen gave birth to a son?

Richard was the son of a concubine, and he had a heretical ability. Sara didn’t know if the current king had one, but at the very least he didn’t have Richard’s cursed power—and he was the long-awaited second child of the king and queen, to boot.

“When Edouard was born, my mother finally went off the deep end. And then...”

He told Sara about how his mother tried to kill Edouard to ensure Richard would be king.

One night, at nine years old, Richard noticed something was off when his mother ran out of the room in the middle of the night, so he followed her.

Then he saw his mother break into his little brother's bedroom, brandishing a knife. The next moment, Richard had transformed into a beast and slit his mother's throat with his claws just as she had been about to stab Edouard.

"There was no time to think. It was either save my mother, who had lost her mind, or save my little brother, who I had always played with in secret. I was forced to choose one, so I chose my brother. Even after I killed my mother, I looked at Edouard sleeping soundly, and I thought...*Thank goodness.*"

"So that's why the queen adopted you?"

Richard nodded.

"I suppose so. She is a commendable person—she was never scared of me. She was kind to me even after she learned about what I'd done. I told Edouard the truth about what happened when he was ten years old, and he just cried and hugged me. Even my father, the late king, never excluded me from anything... That was enough for me.

"My father treated me like he was touching a boil, but he *did* accept me. The queen gave me this villa to live in to thank me for saving her son's life. Edouard continued to love me, even after he discovered the truth. I had servants like Daniel and Claire to wait upon me... So that was enough for me."

Richard chuckled. But it wasn't like his laugh before, when he sounded like he had lost control—it almost sounded like a sorrowful sigh.

"Even if others would call me a monster, I had people who could see me for *me*. I wanted to help with Edouard's government affairs while also getting rid of criminals that would threaten his reign... I never needed a wife or children. I would have died quietly, ridiculed by the world as a reclusive crank. That's all I wanted."

"So I really did get in your way, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. You threw a wrench into my life's plan, which was incredibly troublesome. But...maybe Edouard thought that your coming here might make me more attached to this world."

Richard looked at Sara.

Just then he seemed to realize that she had been lying down the entire time. He gently took both of her arms and helped her sit up. His touch was as polite and gentle as it usually was, utterly different from when he had pushed her down.

“When I heard the princess was coming from a kingdom totally unfamiliar with abilities, I was annoyed, but now I think that might have been for the best... When I get angry, I turn into a beast. If I turn into a beast... I try so hard, but it’s difficult to control myself in that form... There’s a chance I might kill you.”

“If you were truly a cruel person, you wouldn’t try to have any self-control at all. And your mask... You use it to keep from turning into a beast, don’t you?”

Sara reached out to his mask. Richard twitched his head back slightly, but he didn’t reject her touch.

The white surface felt chilly against her fingertips.

This mask... It’s been protecting Richard this whole time.

It blocked out the disgusted stares from unsympathetic strangers and made it difficult for him to show his emotions. By wearing a mask, Richard protected not only himself, but also the people around him.

It would have probably been easier for him to transform and brandish his claws as much as he wanted. With his claws and his fangs, he could slash and silence anyone who abused him in an instant. No one would dare pick a fight with him again.

But the prince didn’t choose that path. Instead, he goes to war for the king and leaves the castle in the dead of night to kill violent criminals...

Sara lowered her arm and lightly touched the back of Richard’s hand. He trembled for just a moment, but he didn’t resist, and he let her gently trace the veins on the back of his hand and brush against his fingernails, which had shrunk back to their normal size.

They were the same hands he used to flip through documents and hold their

teatime snacks. They were gentle hands, and very dear to Sara.

“Don’t you smell blood?”

“It’s all right today. As long as it’s not your blood from an injury, it’s fine.”

“I’m a murderer. I’ve killed your countrymen, and my own mother. I haven’t just killed criminals... I’ve spilled the blood of innocent bystanders that got involved, too.”

“But that wasn’t you acting on your desires. Your ability isn’t some power you craved because you wanted to kill people.”

“...I’ve been so rude to you. How do you not despise me?”

“I was a little shocked at being treated like that, but now that I’ve heard your story, I know it was rather inevitable. Besides, I was the interloper here in the first place.”

Richard didn’t respond. He just hung his head silently.

Sara didn’t break the silence either. She just looked at the swirl of hair on the crown of his head.

Eventually, she plucked up her courage and asked, “Can I take your mask off?”

“...What for?”

“I just want to look at your face.”

Richard fell back into silence. Unsure if this was tacit agreement, she softly touched his mask, but he didn’t do anything in response.

She reached behind his ears and could feel a thin string. Following it with her fingers, she found that it was tied in the back, hidden by Richard’s wavy hair.

She reached around and untied the knot. The strings fell and the white mask concealing the top half of Richard’s face slipped off.

Accentuated by the darkness of the night around them, Richard’s bright green eyes looked at Sara sadly. But despite his sorrow, the prince was breathtakingly beautiful.

For some reason, the shape of his eyes reminded Sara of the king’s eyes, back when she had spoken to him at the castle.

She set his mask down on the bed and Richard turned his face away from her. She could tell he was embarrassed by the red tint of his ears.



“Don’t look too much...” he said.

“You don’t want me to look at you?”

“When you do, I get this restless feeling in my chest... It feels like I’m losing control of my emotions.”

“Um...those feelings are different from the ones that turn you into a beast, right?” Sara asked, just in case.

Richard looked back at her, a spark of amusement in his eyes.

“I transform when I’m angry. What I’m feeling toward you now...is something else,” he said, sulking slightly.

She thought his pout was adorable. A few giggles escaped her. Then she put her hand against his cheek and looked at her husband with smiling eyes.

“Your Highness... Will you let me continue to be by your side?”

“I always thought you’d just get tired of me and leave... The question is, will *you*, even knowing what I am, stay by my side?”

“Of course I will. I told you before, I’m not scared of you because you can transform into a beast.”

Richard’s eyes softened.

He shyly put his hands on Sara’s shoulders and very gently squeezed.

“You don’t find my hands repulsive...? Is it okay for me to...touch you like this?”

“Yes. Please touch me however you want to, Your Highness.”

“I don’t know about phrasing it that way, but... Well, it’s fine. But don’t say stuff like that to anyone but me,” he added, sounding grumpy.

Sara giggled and softly played with the loose waves that fell over Richard’s ears.

“All right. As you command, Your Highness.”

Richard gave a small *hmph* and looked away, but his hands on her shoulders were so gentle, she had to close her eyes against the tender feelings welling up

inside her.

I want to be by his side.

Even if she weren't living as Hermine's body double, even if they weren't in a political marriage, and even if their two kingdoms didn't have a fraught relationship, Sara would still want to be with Richard.

She wanted to do everything she could to support this kind, slightly awkward man who cared so deeply about other people.

Sara lowered her hands. As she did so, her negligee loosened more around her collarbones. As if he sensed something was about to happen, Richard took his hands off her shoulders, and the next moment—

The negligee fell to Sara's waist in one sweeping motion. It was only natural that it had—they were designed to do that, and Richard had untied the ribbon of it himself.

Fortunately, she was wearing a chemise underneath, but for a while, the two of them could only stare at each other.

"Wha...?" Richard sputtered. "What kind of an outfit is that?!"

"What?! You were the one who untied the ribbon holding it up!"

"That's not—! Well, I guess so, but—! N-No, I'm sorry. I didn't think that one through... Hey, what on earth is this thing made of?!"

He had been trying to pull her negligee back up, but the delicate fabric wasn't cooperating with him.

As he fumbled with it, the ribbon slipped into the front of the chemise. Richard's face burned red as he began to panic in earnest. It was clear as day that he was not used to touching a woman's clothes, much less her skin.

"W-Wait a minute! Where the heck did the other ribbon go...? **ACK!** I'm so sorry, I touched you in a weird place... Wh-Why are you laughing?!"

"I'm—I'm so sorry!" Sara said between giggles. "You're just so cute!"

"You aren't supposed to call guys 'cute'...", Richard huffed, sounding back to normal.

Sara's body shook with laughter. The next moment, Richard's hand slipped, and the negligee he had worked so hard to get back up over Sara's shoulders fell down to her thighs. Richard's eyes bulged and then his scarlet face grimaced as if he were in pain.

"What kind of a wife are you?! I don't even know anymore. You should just wear your negligee like that tonight!"

"Of course," said Sara, standing up from the bed. "Then, if you'll excuse me."

"No, wait."

Sara had assumed they had talked enough, and now that they had hashed things out, it was probably time for her to leave. But he had stopped her just after the parting words had left her mouth.

She turned back to him, her hands full trying to keep the negligee pulled up to her chest. Richard was sitting on the bed, biting his lip. He was grabbing a fistful of his shirt at his chest and looking at her.

"I-If it's about your clothes, I'll fix it properly... So...would you sleep here tonight?"

"Wh-What?"

"I-If you don't want to, that's okay. All we'll do is sleep—really. I promise I won't do anything improper."

Sara blinked in surprise at his faltering words. Unable to control the emotions bubbling up inside her, she started giggling again.

That invitation wasn't very slick!

But it was exactly what she would have expected from Richard.

She nodded and sat down beside him.

"Of course... Your Highness?"

"What is it?"

"I'm so glad I came to Ferrier... I truly am."

She had agreed to take Hermine's place and had then been betrayed by Firmin and the real princess. She had been sad for a bit, but then immediately

after, anger had surged through her. That was when she had looked at Richard's portrait and vowed that she would be happy in Ferrier. That had all happened quite some time ago.

The prince had been called a recluse—a misanthropic weirdo. But he was also an incredibly kind, timid person.

Sara had touched his heart and helped him unleash feelings he had kept locked inside, and she had been able to reveal her honest feelings, too.

Father... Mother... I think things are going to go well for me.

Sara reached out and touched Richard's left hand. He flinched for a second, but then turned over his hand and linked their fingers.

That large hand had had sharp claws, been covered in blood, and had taken away other people's lives. But it could also hold the teatime snacks they shared or gently squeeze Sara's hand in return and match her level of passion, as he did now.

Richard's eyes widened slightly in shock at Sara's confession, and then he smiled softly.

"Yes. I'm also glad you became my wife... I really am. Oh, and..."

"Yes?"

"Yesterday... I'm sorry for spoiling your kind gesture. I ruined the lunes you peeled for me, too... That was awful of me."

Sara let out a giggle.

"Hey. Why are you laughing?"

"It's nothing. I'll make you tea again tomorrow. Let's eat lunes together then, too," Sara whispered.

Richard smiled, relieved.

That smile alone was enough to keep Sara going.

Chapter 4: Suspicion and Confession

ONE season had passed since Sara and Richard had gotten married. The roses that had been budding at the beginning of their marriage were now in full bloom, sprinkling the villa gardens with splashes of color.

“Look, Your Highness!” cried Sara. “Birds have come here to play!”

“You’re right,” Richard replied, his tone somewhat formal.

Their hands were laced together, so when Sara rushed forward in excitement, she ended up pulling her husband along.

Sara had recently been encouraging him to go out for walks during the daytime. He was quite reluctant at first, but after her continued requests and Daniel and Claire backing her up, he eventually caved. He agreed, but only on the conditions that Sara go with him, they don’t leave the villa grounds, and he always be allowed to wear a mask.

Everyone had been shocked that the reclusive prince started to go outside (albeit begrudgingly), but they had been perhaps even more shocked that he had conceded to his wife’s request.

Some aristocrats had apparently heard a rumor of the prince’s daytime outings and had tried to gate-crash the villa, but with an uncharacteristically severe expression, Richard had ordered impenetrable security to be stationed when they were out.

As a result, the gardens and the surrounding area were practically devoid of human presence when they went for walks. At most, Sara might spot soldiers and gardeners employed at the villa, but even Richard’s chamberlain, Daniel, and Sara’s personal maid, Claire, watched them from a distance instead of accompanying them.

Richard held the parasol, so whenever Sara would dash forward, she’d slip out from under its shade. She told him she wouldn’t mind holding the parasol

herself, but he refused to hand it over, insisting, “This is the husband’s job,” so she just let him do as he pleased.

“Do you see that little bird over there?” he asked.

“It’s such a pretty blue, isn’t it? I’ve only seen it a few times before... Do you know what it is, Your Highness?”

“It’s called a ciclana. It’s a tiny bird that lives in warmer climates from the end of fall until spring, but during this time of the year, it migrates north and lives around the royal capital. The people of Ferrier have known about it since olden times. It eats harmful pests and mice and is often sung about in nursery rhymes.”

“Wow...”

Richard might not have left the villa very much, but his mind was an incredible treasure trove of knowledge. He was well-informed on the subjects of economics and politics, certainly, but he also knew a lot about plants, animals, and other branches of ecology. Sara could see why the king relied on him so much.

Sara spotted another ciclana—they must have come to play in the garden in a pair. They perched side by side on the back of a slightly aged bench, chirping at each other adorably.

“Can we get closer?”

“Ciclanas are typically easygoing birds, so they should be fine if you get closer. You should try.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“...I’ll watch from here,” Richard replied, handing her the parasol.

As he was stubbornly unwilling to move any closer, Sara took the parasol and approached the bench. She watched the two birds closely as they continued to chirp happily.

They didn’t seem apprehensive of her at all. Even when she approached with the umbrella in her hand, they didn’t fly away—in fact, their beady round eyes returned her gaze. When they both tilted their heads in unison, a smile crept

onto Sara's face.

"They're so cute... They look like a couple! Your Highness, come look! They're so adorable!"

Richard was quiet for a few moments, but at his wife's insistence, he reluctantly began to walk over from where he waited in the shade.

Sara really wanted him to get a good look at their adorable visitors, but—

After Richard had taken only a few steps, the ciclanas seemed to notice his presence and immediately took off into the sky.

"Oh!"

"...I figured that would happen. I'm sorry for making them fly away."

"No, don't worry about it. But...why did you think that would happen?"

Beforehand, he had said "they should be fine if *you* get closer." It was almost as if he had known that the birds would fly away if he approached.

Richard took the parasol from her and, after some awkward silence, looked up to where the ciclanas had vanished in the sky.

"For a long time now, animals haven't liked me very much. It's probably because I stink, huh?"

"Stink...?"

He was probably referring to the smell that lingered after he transformed into a beast out of anger.

He hadn't gone out at night for quite some time, however, so it seemed as though he hadn't had any "jobs" in that department for a while. Subsequently, even Sara, who had an unusually sharp nose, couldn't detect any of the beast odor on him. But then again, animals had a much more sensitive sense of smell than Sara did, and the ciclanas probably also had a sixth sense for detecting the presence of predators.

"I've frightened away birds, as well as the occasional stray dog or cat that wandered onto the villa grounds," he explained. "They'd growl or hiss at me. Horses get scared, too, naturally. It's like they instinctively know that I can turn

into an enormous beast.”

“I see...,” Sara said, choosing an innocuous response.

She loved animals, so she would be deeply shocked if a dog or cat growled or hissed at her. They were probably just acting on instinct—trying to protect themselves against a stronger creature—but it clearly hurt Richard.

Always wanting to pet a fluffy animal, but never being able to... That would certainly have been a painful experience.

“I suppose you can’t help it if it’s how you smell. Animals have better noses than I do,” Sara said.

“I’ve been wondering about your sensitivity to smells for a while... Do people in Saleilles have better noses than we do?”

“I-I don’t think so. It’s just a skill I was born with—more like a talent, really.”

“I see... It’s an interesting talent. Much more useful than my ability.”

“You think so? At least you can fight—my talent doesn’t give me any fighting power at all.”

“You don’t need a talent like that,” he said shortly, but his tone was much gentler than before.

For centuries, there had been prejudice in Ferrier against people with an ability like Richard’s. Even in his twenties, he was still affected by the feelings and ideas his birth mother had instilled in him as a child, and Sara was keenly aware that they were not going to be so easily undone.

But the prince was moving forward, little by little. His manner of speaking and the look in his eye had become kinder, and he did accept most of Sara’s invitations or requests, despite the annoyed face she was often met with. One of these positive changes was that he spent more time with his mask off during the daytime, even in front of her.

He did say he wore his mask to keep his anger in check... Does that mean he doesn’t think he’ll get angry in front of me?

Sara melted into a grin at the thought. Richard, ever perceptive, noticed immediately.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking...about how fun it is to spend my days with you like this, Your Highness.”

Richard mumbled something inaudible with such a look of concentration, Sara’s face grew suddenly serious.

“What?” she asked.

Richard’s mouth snapped shut, his face steely, and then he turned away from her.

“I said...I feel the same.”

“Oh, Your Highness...!” she gushed.

“...I’m tired. Let’s head home.”

“Sure. I think Claire made some iced tea. Shall we have some together?”

“Yes, let’s have some.”

Richard quickly marched toward the house, but soon after he slowed his step so that Sara, wearing a dress, wouldn’t have to jog to match pace with him.

I hope these days can go on forever..., Sara thought, even as the thorn of truth cut deeper and deeper into her heart—the truth that she was still deceiving Richard, even now.



IT was night.

Claire was giggling.

“What’s the matter, Claire? You’ve been so giddy all evening.”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because His Highness has been summoning you so frequently,” Claire explained, combing through and massaging scented oil into Sara’s hair. Thanks to Claire’s diligent attentions, Sara’s hair had become much softer and prettier than it had been before. Her skin, too, had become softer and brighter.

Sara had certainly been summoned to Richard’s bedroom at night much more

frequently as of late. It was unavoidable that some nights “work” would unexpectedly pull Richard away from the villa, but even then, he had started coming to visit Sara before he left so that they could exchange farewells.

W-Well, to be sure, the prince inviting his wife to his bedroom would probably have...certain connotations... But...

Sara smiled awkwardly at Claire, her face burning hot. “He may summon me to his bedroom, but we just chat for a little bit before going to sleep.”

“For now, yes. But you’d best prepare yourself for the possibility that he could put the moves on you at any time!”

“...I know,” said Sara, nodding obediently. Saying anything else when Claire was in such a jubilant mood would be futile.

Sure enough, when Sara looked at her reflection in the mirror, her face was crimson. She deeply detested her skin’s propensity to blush in uncomfortable situations.

After a while, Daniel opened the white door. He smiled when he saw Sara, who was dressed in a negligee, and gestured inside.

“This way, Princess Hermine.”

“Thank you. Good night, you two.”

“Yes, sweet dreams.”

“Have a good night, Princess Hermine.”

Sara walked into Richard’s bedroom. The lights were already out.

It looked like Richard was already in bed, and when she opened the thin bed curtains, she saw a lump under the duvet.

“Your Highness?”

The bedcover rustled, and then Richard’s head popped out. He sat up.

“Oh, you’re here.”

He patted the spot beside him. Sara slid into bed, and he pulled the blankets up over her.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” she said.

“No, I was awake. It’s unseasonably cold tonight, so I was worried you would shiver from the chill when you came.”

It *was* quite a cold night, but because Richard had warmed the bed with his body temperature, it was a bit warmer under the sheets.

“Thank you. But wouldn’t it be my job to warm your bed, Your Highness?” she asked.

“No. Don’t they say that women are more sensitive to the cold?” Richard asked, his eyebrows slightly pulled together. “I can’t let you catch a chill.”

He spoke as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. As if it were entirely natural for him to be worrying about Sara’s comfort.

He really is a wonderful man...

There was a gentle scent coming from the pillows. It was mostly the smell of Richard’s shampoo, but it was also partly Richard’s own natural scent. Whenever Sara rested her cheek against it, she felt totally relaxed.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Richard. “Apparently, there’s an envoy from Saleilles at the castle. You must have heard, too, I imagine?”

Sara nodded. She knew that getting into Richard’s bed didn’t necessarily mean they would be having sweet, romantic moments.

“That’s right. I received a letter from the envoy not long ago.”

The letter, authored by Hermine’s father, the king, had been written in a style overflowing with affection—exactly the sort of letter a father missing his daughter would write.

Sara was almost positive the king’s face had been puckered in distaste while writing it, as if he were being forced to chew on a lemon. Sara had become strangely giddy while imagining this scene when she had held the letter in her room, and Claire, watching, had misinterpreted her reaction completely and told her, “You must be thrilled to get a letter from home.”

Back in Richard’s bedroom, he responded to her comment with a passive “I see.” A faint line appeared between his eyebrows, and he looked at Sara.

“So you have your father and then an older brother... You don’t talk about your homeland or your family very much.”

“...You think so?” Sara asked, trying to sound unaffected, but her mind was racing in panic.

The real Hermine would have missed her family and home, wouldn’t she? The prince of Saleilles was fine, Sara supposed—he seemed to be a mild-mannered man who rarely returned to the royal capital—but she could never see the king as a paternal substitute.

But I can’t exactly tell him that...

“I crossed the ocean fully resolved to put down my roots in this kingdom, so... I’m trying to think of Ferrier as my homeland, and of you, the queen mother, and the king as my family... I must be a terribly heartless princess, aren’t I?”

“N-No, not at all! It makes me happy to hear you say that,” Richard said in a rush before clearing his throat awkwardly and lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. “...I was thinking of preparing the tea myself at tomorrow’s teatime.”

“What? You?”

“I pretty much know how to serve tea... The envoy brought tea leaves from Saleilles. I’m sure it will suit your palate, so I want to treat you to a drink.”

Richard was still looking at the ceiling, so he didn’t see her reaction. Her eyes were glued to his profile. She couldn’t stop blinking.

His Highness...preparing tea for me...

“Are you sure?”

“You always bring me tea, don’t you? So, as a token of gratitude for all you do... Wait, no, that’s not it... Well, whatever. Anyway, make sure you remember. That’s all I wanted to say.”

The last half of this came out very quickly. Then Richard turned on his side and Sara found herself looking at the back of his head.

It was a little lonely, only being able to see his back, but on the other hand, he wouldn’t show his back—and while he slept, at that—to someone he didn’t

trust.

Sara's heart thudded loudly as she reached out and touched his back. He jolted in surprise but accepted her touch.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I'm really looking forward to tomorrow."

"...Yeah."

His reply was short, but his voice was very gentle.



THE next morning, Sara reluctantly took up her pen to write a response to the king of Saleilles, but then she received something that only made her throbbing headache worse. Claire had brought the letter to her so cheerfully, Sara felt bad for her reaction, so she told Claire she would read it in her bedroom as an excuse to be alone.

When Sara looked it over, alone in her room, she felt her mouth pull down into a scowl.

"Well, lucky you..."

Under the destination on the cutesy envelope, the author had written *To Princess Hermine, with love and respect*. Under sender was written *From Sara Ernaux*.

It was a letter from Hermine, who had married Firmin, son of Viscount Ernaux.

In a fit of anger, Sara smashed her thumb against the part that said *with love and respect* before begrudgingly opening the envelope and taking out the letter.

Hermine had used a letter set with a gaudy, childish design—Sara would never have used something like that. Just looking at it made her feel sick.

I just want to burn it without even reading it, but I suppose I'll have to write a reply to it eventually. And besides, Claire might get suspicious if I just toss it somewhere...

At any rate, Sara was sure nothing Hermine could have written would make her feel any better. However, perhaps because she had started reading it with

such bad expectations, she didn't actually get as hurt by the letter as she thought she would be.

She did get irritated, however, reading Hermine gushing, *My wedded life with Firmin is pure bliss, or He coos sweet nothings to me every day, or I'm just too happy to be troubled by anything!*

I can't imagine Hermine being suited for the role of a viscount's wife. I'm sure she just acts like a spoiled baby around Firmin and his parents.

And even though Hermine had disguised herself as Sara, the *real* Sara just wanted to laugh humorlessly when she read Hermine's hollow platitudes. *I wish I could give you a fraction of the happiness I feel, Princess Hermine... I hope you can find happiness, even in such a faraway land...*

When Sara saw the spot where Hermine had pressed her painted lips beside her signature, she really wanted to rip up the letter and throw it in the fireplace.

Hermine truly coveted her own happiness but totally lacked the capacity to empathize with anyone else.

Sara could admit she had made many mistakes, too, but Richard had forgiven them all in the end. If the real Hermine had been the one to come to Ferrier, however, how would things have ended up? At the very least, it was impossible to imagine that Hermine would have gotten along with Richard better than Sara, her former servant, did, which was a bit sad.

Well, if Hermine and Firmin are getting along okay, they can do as they please.

Hermine probably hadn't even written about her love-filled days with Firmin out of any spite—she might have even been trying to encourage Sara.

But if Sara hadn't become close with Richard—if she had instead been miserable day in and day out—such a letter might have solidified a resolution to take her own life.

I dread doing it, but I'll have to write up a reply to this, too... Oh! But it's almost time for tea, isn't it?

With perfect timing, Daniel came to fetch Sara the same moment she returned to the living room. When he spotted her, Daniel smiled and gestured to the next room.

“Princess Hermine, His Highness is all ready for you. He simply cannot wait to treat you to some tea!”

Sara heard Richard shout through the wall, “Don’t say more than you need to!”

Both Sara and Claire had to suppress their giggles.

“Right. I’m going now.”

Temporarily pushing the letter out of her mind, Sara bounded over to Richard’s quarters with Claire.

Daniel showed them not into the study, where they usually took tea, but to Richard’s living room. It was the first time Sara had been in this room, so she was a little nervous, but the layout was almost exactly the same as Sara’s living room. She immediately liked it because the furnishings and decorations created a relaxed atmosphere, likely chosen according to Richard’s tastes.

The tea set and snacks were already set out on a glass table in the middle of the room. Richard was bent over them, doing something. When he spotted Sara, his face softened, and he gestured toward a small one-person sofa.

“Thank you for coming. Well, please take a seat here.”

“Thank you.”

Lifting the skirt of her dress, Sara carefully sat down on the sofa, careful not to crease the fabric.

Richard didn’t just line up the tea utensils and pour hot water into the teapot—he even set out the individual serving plates and the finger bowls.

“Thank you for everything, Your Highness,” she said.

“Nonsense. I’m perfectly capable of entertaining my wife.”

She thought he had slightly missed the point with his reply, but it was fitting, coming from such a deeply serious man.

He wasn't as used to handling the tea utensils as Sara and Claire were, but when Sara saw his eyebrows furrow in concentration as he added tea leaves to the teapot, and the way he assiduously brought over the jars of honey and sugar from the shelf, her heart glowed with affection.

He wasn't wearing a mask, and Sara was thrilled to be able to see his facial expressions so clearly.

After a while, a nostalgic smell started wafting out of the teapot. The tea leaves were unique because they barely smelled of anything when they were dry, but when they were steeped, the aroma became stronger all at once. The tea leaves weren't too expensive, but it was easy to see why the flavor was a popular one for Saleilles nobles to drink every day.

After sensing how excited Sara was getting, Richard turned toward her after wiping a cup with a cloth, a faint smile on his face.

"You certainly seem happy," he remarked.

"Of course I am! Oh... You're drinking something else?"

"I am. The envoy from Saleilles that brought me the tea said it has quite a strong flavor, and that someone used to Ferrier cuisine probably wouldn't like it very much. I'm sorry, but I'm just going to drink my regular tea."

The flavors in Saleilles cooking were generally stronger than in Ferrier cooking. The envoy was probably right—born and raised in Ferrier, Richard would have likely found the strong taste of Saleilles black tea unpalatable. It was a pity they couldn't drink the same thing, but Sara was happy enough that he wanted to have tea with her.

Richard seemed to have correctly read Sara's expression. His cheeks flashed pink, and he turned away and began to prepare his own tea.

After a while, both drinks were ready. Sara's tea had become such a dark red color that she couldn't see the bottom of the cup, but Richard's was its usual semitransparent color.

"Was it okay to let it get that dark...?" he asked.

"It's perfect! You're really good at making tea, Your Highness."

“Maybe you should taste it before you start complimenting me. It’s cool enough now, so just swing it back.”

Sara laughed.

“All right, then. Here I go...”

Sara lifted the cup to her face, but she suddenly froze... There was a strange, pungent smell mingling with the sweet smell of the tea she was familiar with.

What is that? It’s not the honey or sugar...is it?

She sniffed it several more times.

If she had to make a guess, she would say it was some sort of medicinal herb. Claire often used medicinal herbs that were most effective when mixed with black tea, so maybe something like that had been added.

However, just to be sure, Sara carefully brought the cup to her lips and took the smallest sip... She tasted a piercing bitterness mixed into the sweetness and slammed the cup back on the table with a crashing noise.

It was such an uncharacteristically impolite thing for Sara to do that not only Richard, but also Claire and Daniel, watching from their position against the wall, jumped in surprise and looked over at her.

“Wh-What’s wrong?!”

Sara glanced up at Richard. He was watching her with concern.

She couldn’t believe it...but there was no other explanation.

Sara’s nose and tongue had unmistakably detected a strange smell and taste—a poison had been slipped into her drink.

It can’t be...

She felt panicked tremors threatening the hand around her cup.

It can’t be, it can’t be... played on repeat in her head, but her tongue was already becoming numb. Her mouth was full of bitter saliva.

But...Sara couldn’t ask him.

There was no way she could ask Richard, “Your Highness, did you put

something in my tea?”

So Sara forced herself to smile and put her hand to her cheek in an attempt to gloss over what had just happened.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. I was suddenly struck by memories of my hometown, and...I was just surprised.”

“R-Really? Well, that’s a relief...”

It was a terrible excuse, but Richard had accepted it without any resistance and started sipping at his cup. As he leisurely drank his tea, his face started to blur in Sara’s vision. Panicking, she looked back at the cup in her hand.

There was probably poison in it. Even just having that tiny bit of it in her mouth had made her tongue numb. If she had “swung it back,” as Richard had told her to, the poison would have probably seriously injured her throat—assuming it didn’t simply kill her.

But would the prince really have put poison in my cup? I can’t believe it...

Besides, Richard had originally gotten the tea leaves from the Saleilles envoy. If the problem lay with the tea leaves themselves, then the envoy would become the suspect...

But if I had died, the tea would have been the first thing called into question. If there’s a problem with the tea leaves, that would mean Saleilles wants me out of the picture... Not to mention, there was a serious possibility the prince might have drunk the tea, too...

Who added the poison? What kind of poison was it? Why did they poison the tea at all? Such questions ran circles around Sara’s head.

But she had no time to dwell on them.

Sara hadn’t drunk any more of the tea for quite some time. Indeed, she had been staring at the cup with fear in her eyes. Richard looked uneasy at this. The hand holding a piece of teacake froze as he looked at Sara.

“What’s wrong? Didn’t you say you loved that tea? There’s still plenty of it left, so don’t be shy. Help yourself.”

“R-Right...”

“Did something get into it? I can brew another cup right away.”

For a moment, Sara almost agreed to Richard’s suggestion, but then she realized that a fresh cup of tea might not be any safer. If there were a problem with the tea leaves, it would be just as dangerous, even if they poured out the remainder of the contents of the teapot.

And...if Richard really were evil enough to poison her, he would just tamper with the new cup of tea, too.

No! He would never do something like that!

Sara’s free hand tightened into a fist. They may have only been married for a short while, but she was confident that she and Richard had built an unmistakable bond of gentle regard. He *had* been accompanying her outdoors and taking his mask off more recently at Sara’s request, but if he really didn’t want to do those things, he would tell her so!

Maybe he really hated all of those things and felt forced to bear with them, and now felt hopeless...?

The inside of Sara’s mouth was acrid. Her thick saliva felt like it was clogging up her throat. All her insides, from her heart to her stomach, were as cold as if they had been dunked into an ice bath. Pain radiated from her organs, which felt like they were being wrung out.

If Sara had faith in Richard, she would have to drink the tea. But if the poison in the tea had made her entire tongue numb just from the tiny taste she had, she couldn’t imagine that ending well for her. But it wasn’t like she could throw out the tea with Claire and Daniel watching, either...

And so, without the time to think about it properly or the power to consider her options calmly, she hesitated before saying—

“I’m sorry, Your Highness...”

“What?”

“I find myself so overcome with emotions...that I will just gratefully accept the spirit in which the tea was given.”

Sara had selected the “DO NOT DRINK” option.

There hadn't been some grand calculation or reasoning behind her choice. Sara hadn't been taught in Saleilles what the best course of action was when you were about to be poisoned by your husband.

So Sara had been totally unprepared to see Claire and Daniel bristle in displeasure, or to hear Richard catch his breath, clearly hurt by her words. Sara thought she might stop breathing altogether.

Even when you realize you've done something unthinkable, or made the wrong choice, there's no undoing what's been done.

"I... I see... I'm sorry," Richard muttered. "It seems I'm not capable of entertaining you after all..."

Normally, Sara would have spoken in a more reserved manner, but when she heard the turmoil in Richard's voice, she felt gutted. She would have preferred if he had actually just ripped out her heart and killed her right then and there.

"L-Listen, Your Highness, I—"

"Don't worry about it... Daniel, clean everything up. Claire, take my wife back to her room."

"Your Highness!"

"Don't look so upset... I overstepped. I'm sorry," Richard said matter-of-factly, his back turned to Sara. "I'll send the tea leaves to your room later so you can have Claire brew them for you."

Never had Sara wished that Richard was wearing his mask as much as she did then...

Claire silently helped Sara to her feet, but as Daniel tidied up the tea utensils, he shot her a glare for the first time since she had come to Ferrier.

Daniel was always cheerful and kind, but it was all for Richard, his master. From Daniel's perspective, the prince was totally faultless, and Sara was just a spoiled princess who had rejected the tea Richard had so earnestly prepared. It was a totally appropriate response from a servant so devoted to his lord.

Your Highness...

As Claire pulled Sara away by the arm, Sara looked back over her shoulder,

but Richard had at some point put his mask on and was simply looking out the window.

Later that day, the tin of tea leaves was delivered to Sara's room. Sara immediately smelled them and tried to brew some for herself. There was none of the offending smell from before, however, and the only thing she could taste was the nostalgic flavor of the tea.



SOME sort of poison had been slipped into the tea Richard had brewed, and Sara found that her relationship with him had become strained because of it. She didn't believe he would do such a thing, but nothing seemed wrong with the actual tin of tea leaves. If there had been, then that would have opened up the possibility of Richard, not Sara, being poisoned.

And no matter how much selfish bitterness officials in Saleilles held toward Ferrier, they would never try to kill Richard through a tin of tea leaves clearly marked "Product of Saleilles."

I've heard the envoy is still in Ferrier...but I can't ask him, of course.

The envoy might not know that the "Hermine" in Ferrier was actually Sara.

Sara couldn't imagine the conversation would go well, and she didn't have the courage to take the gamble.

Besides, the envoy was very likely a high-ranking bureaucrat, so he might get an inkling that something was amiss if he saw her face. Sara would also be scared of asking him, "Was this tin of tea leaves laced with poison?" If the envoy were to say, "This isn't Princess Hermine!" then all her effort and determination thus far would be for nothing.

But the prince was the only one who handled the tea utensils, so he must have been the one who put the poison in my cup...

Sara wanted to trust him. She didn't think he'd have any reason to hurt her, either.

But even so, whenever she looked at Richard's face, she struggled to keep her own expression neutral. She wasn't confident she could maintain a smile in

front of him.

Richard is avoiding me, too...

That only made sense. It had been his first time making tea for Sara, after having finally opened his heart to her. Sara rejecting the tea must have been incredibly painful to someone as sensitive as him—of course he wouldn't want to see her after that.

That's why she had essentially been living a life totally separate from Richard.

But...

"Are you sure you're finished, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm full. Could you tell them to give me smaller portions from now on?"

Claire looked at Sara with concern. Sara put down her knife and fork and smiled up at her. More than half of her plate was still full of food.

Ever since that day, Sara had developed a fear of eating and had been consuming less and less.

She didn't so much have a problem with foods that had been thoroughly cooked, like baked sweets or breads, but it was very difficult to reach for other things, like liquids or raw vegetables. Even if she was hungry, she simply had no desire to eat any more.

Claire was devotedly taking care of Sara. Daniel seemed to be taking Richard's side in the matter, but Claire had simply told him with a stiff expression, "There must be some explanation," and had stood by Sara's side as she resolutely avoided Richard.

Even though Claire might lose her position for being my ally in this...

In fact, the previous evening, Sara had overheard Claire and Daniel arguing over Sara and Richard. Daniel had insisted, "She hurt the prince. Hermine should just apologize." Then Claire, undaunted, had shot back, "She just needs space right now. The only one who knows what Hermine is going through is *Hermine*."

Sara had once begged her, "Look, I'll be fine, so please go attend to Richard." But Claire was unyielding, reasserting, "The Hermine I know wouldn't reject the

prince without a good reason.”

My actions have ruined the peace of the royal villa...

A pain shot through Sara’s chest at the thought and tears sprang to her eyes. But she knew she had no right to cry—*she* had been the one to reject Richard, after all.

She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to apologize about the tea.

But she had no idea how to broach the subject or what her conclusion would even be.

She wanted to reconcile with her kind, sensitive husband, but she didn’t know the right way to go about it. In fact, she’d made the wrong choice once before.

Time ticked forward in subdued melancholy.

Then, three days after the tea incident, Sara was absentmindedly looking down at the garden, which was bathed in the blueish glow of dusk, from the chair she had pulled up beside the window. Suddenly, she heard Claire’s startled voice from the living room.

“Excuse me, Princess Hermine!”

Sara turned her head toward the door. Claire looked quite flustered.

“What is it, Claire?”

“Actually... His Highness is here. He says he wants to ask you a few questions...”

Sara’s eyes widened. It had been a few days since she had distanced herself from him, but she had never imagined he would be the one to initiate contact.

I can’t turn him away.

Lowering her eyes to the floor, Sara nodded.

“I understand... Please let him in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sara went to the living room with Claire, who looked slightly pained.

But Richard was already there. Without his mask on, Sara could see that his

cheeks were flushed as bright as a sunset, and his green eyes were unabashedly glued to her.

“I’m sorry to have barged in so suddenly like this.”

“No, it’s not a problem at all.”

“Could I talk to you for a moment?”

Even at a time like this, Richard had phrased it as a question, giving Sara the final say. If she were to refuse him, he would obediently leave—and she would break his heart even more.

Sara nodded and sat opposite Richard.

His eyes were downcast, and he seemed quite troubled by something.

“...I heard that you haven’t been eating much lately. Your cheeks look sunken... Are you not feeling well?”

“What?!” she squeaked.

Sara had steeled herself for the eventuality that she’d have to answer questions about the tea, so his line of inquiry had taken her entirely off guard.

Richard’s eyebrows furrowed together as if he were enduring physical pain. His eyes were full of anxiety as they raked over her body.

“Your skin has gotten pale, too... I’m entirely clueless about how women feel, so if I’m the reason you haven’t been eating much...please tell me. I’ll do everything I can to make things better, and I’ll try to stop whatever it is that’s making you unwell.”

Sara sat frozen in stunned silence.

“If you’re just sick of me, I’ll try to accept that as something out of my control. But if I’m the reason you’re unwell, I’ll write to the king of Saleilles and— H-Hey! What’s— What’s wrong? Are you crying?!” Richard asked, panicked.

It was only then that Sara realized tears had been silently sliding down her face. She must have been so exhausted that she didn’t even notice she was crying.

Large, hot tears fell off her face and splattered against the backs of her hands.

Overcome with shock, Richard gazed in a stupor, but eventually he pulled out a handkerchief from his breast pocket and walked over to Sara.

“U-Um... If it’s all right with you, may I wipe away your tears?” he asked.

“I-I’m sorry... I’m all right.”

“Clearly not... Hey, don’t rub at your eyes. They’ll get swollen that way. Hold still...”

Sara had been rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands. Richard’s words had at first come out like a parent scolding a child, but by the end his voice had softened with concern. Sara pursed her lips tightly and let Richard wipe away her tears with his handkerchief.

After drying her cheeks, Richard, clearly relieved, pardoned himself briefly for the imposition before taking a seat beside her.

The sofa sank slightly at his weight, making Sara’s body lean toward him. The soft, gentle scent from his sachet made her heart ache.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions, and I want you to say, ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ or just shake your head in reply,” Richard began.

“Okay.”

“Do you hate me?”

It was a remarkably straightforward question.

Sara didn’t even have to think about her response—she just shook her head. Richard let out a breath of relief, which tickled Sara’s hair.

“I see. I’m glad... So then, three days ago... The reason you didn’t drink your tea *wasn’t* because you hated me?”

Sara nodded.

The questions had been easy to answer so far, but when Richard asked the next one, Sara couldn’t decide on a response.

“Then... Are you scared of me?”

Was she scared of Richard?

I don't know...

She didn't know, but when she thought about poison being slipped into her tea...she couldn't help feeling scared of Richard's hands, even as they held his handkerchief.

"Your Highness..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry for how rude I've been. I... I want to trust you, Your Highness."

Sara felt him quietly suck in his breath. She lifted her head and boldly met his clear green eyes.

"Your Highness... I know it's rude, but...could I ask you just one question?"

"Yes, of course you can."

"...If I died, would you be sad?"

Instead of directly asking "Did you poison me?" or "Did you try to kill me?" Sara had taken an indirect approach.

But Richard seemed to have guessed something. His eyes widened. He looked surprised, but not upset.

Sara could almost sense his feelings from the way his eyes wavered, and the tension that had been coiled around her heart loosened slightly.

"Of course I would be sad!"

"Your Highness..."

"I have no way of knowing what you're going through," Richard began, his voice immeasurably kind, "and I won't force you to tell me. But I know you're worried about something... Thank you for asking me your question."

Her question had been strange enough that a barked "Don't be ridiculous!" would have been warranted. But never did Sara imagine he'd thank her for it.

She blinked, and another tear fell from her eye. Richard gently put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her toward him.

She only smelled his gentle, sweet scent.

Her tears were soaked up by the collar of Richard's coat.

"...Do you love me, even if only a little bit?" he asked.

She replied without any hesitation.

"Yes. I love you. I... I love you so much."

Richard huffed out a few relieved chuckles.

"Thank you... I love you, too."

His words melted sweetly and gently against Sara's heart like cotton candy snowflakes.

She had no idea that telling Richard she loved him and hearing that sentiment returned would feel so amazing. But neither had she expected that she would feel pain, misery, and vexation in equal measure.

How wonderful would it be if she could tell him, "I'm not Hermine, I'm her maid, Sara."

How wonderful would it be if she had the courage to tell him, "My tea was poisoned the other day, but I have faith it wasn't you."

She couldn't tell him the truth, but he didn't hold this against her—he just quietly accepted her.

He wiped her tears, held her close, and stroked her hair affectionately.

"I promise you... One day I will get rid of whatever is gnawing at your heart."

"....."

"So for now, please eat. Let me hear your cheerful voice—just once a day will do. Show me that you're alive."

"I will."

He didn't want her dead.

Just knowing that was enough to set Sara's mind at ease.



AFTER that day, Richard started going out more proactively.

He didn't tell Sara what he was doing, but Daniel did tell her, "It seems His Highness has overcome his reclusive nature for you, Princess Hermine."

Daniel had slightly warmed up to Sara again since she had her talk with Richard. He apologized for his thorny attitude but doubled down on his insistence that the prince was his number-one priority. Sara approved of his loyalty—she agreed that Daniel should put Richard first.

At any rate...if Richard hadn't slipped poison into my tea, then there must have been something wrong with the tin of tea leaves...

Which meant someone from Saleilles had tried to assassinate Sara. But she couldn't see the point in a Saleilles envoy killing his own former princess...

And even if the envoy were executed, the fault would still lie with Saleilles, which would make the entire political marriage scheme be all for nothing. It just didn't seem like that plan would benefit either kingdom.

There must be more to this than meets the eye...

Unfortunately, Sara wasn't well versed in conspiracy or strategy, so she couldn't think of anything, no matter how much she hemmed and hawed over it.

She sighed, walked over to her wardrobe, and took out the corsage she kept there.

Mom...

The glass flower felt slightly chilly cradled in her bare hands.



TEMPERATURES rose as they moved into the season where long-sleeved dresses would make Sara a little sweaty during the day.

"An...evening party?" Sara asked, repeating what Richard had just told her.

She put a bookmark in the book on abilities she had been reading.

Richard was wearing his mask and sitting on the sofa opposite her. He nodded and handed her the document he had been holding.

"Yes. I've always used all sorts of excuses to refuse him before, but Edouard's

begging me to come if at all possible. He seems to think the people of Ferrier want to personally offer me their congratulations for finally settling down. He said we might as well go together as husband and wife.”

“He wants me to come, too...?” Sara asked with slightly furrowed eyebrows.

She was sure her tea had been poisoned by someone who didn’t like her. She didn’t know who did it or what their ultimate goal was, but she wanted to refrain from going out as much as possible.

As if Richard could read her thoughts, his thin lips turned down slightly.

“You don’t want to go, either? Then let’s decline.”

“No, no, no! That’s not even an option, right?!”

If the king himself was begging them to go, they couldn’t just turn him down for their own selfish reasons.

Besides...there will be many watchful eyes in the castle. No one would dare act at a party with so many people...right?

“Let’s go together,” Sara continued. “I also have some uneasiness about attending, but...I’d be thrilled to be introduced to other people as your wife.”

“You’d be thrilled...?”

“Yes. So let’s go.”

“.....”

“Your Highness?”

“All right... If you say so.”

Sara got an agreement out of him, even if it was an incredibly reluctant one.

Without a moment’s delay, Daniel, who had been watching from the side of the room, went to fetch Richard a writing tool to get his signature before he could change his mind. Daniel looked happy at this turn of events, as well—perhaps because the master he loved and respected could be shown off to the people of Ferrier.

After signing the document Daniel offered him, Richard heaved a great sigh. It almost seemed like a black fog was starting to surround him.

“Your Highness... You don’t want to go that badly?” Sara asked.

“Of course I don’t want to go,” he replied immediately.

Richard had been a recluse for so long and wasn’t used to high society. Sara was starting to see the point to his hermit lifestyle.

“To make matters worse, you haven’t been well recently. If you go to a chaotic, crowded event like a party, you’ll only get even sicker. Besides, the other nobles will almost certainly watch us with their curious eyes, and I don’t very much like everyone looking at my wife as if she were a piece of art to be admired.”

“.....”

“Also, you’re a lovely young woman, so I’m sure people will come up to you with perverse thoughts. And because you’re unusually kind, you’re practically incapable of bluntly rebuffing people who approach you, even if they have ulterior motives, which might make them try to push their luck with you... So let’s just go in, say a few hellos, and then get out of there. I also just hate crowded places... What?”

“Huh?”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Sara suddenly realized she had been staring unblinkingly at him, almost to the point of rudeness.

“That was just...unexpected.”

“What was?”

“I was so sure the reason you didn’t want to go to the party was just because you hate being around crowds...”

“...Well, yes, that’s a part of it.”

This time Richard looked taken aback, his green eyes blinking rapidly in surprise before looking away.

“But...the biggest reason I didn’t want to go was...because you might be uncomfortable at the party. I’m used to it, so I can power through it. But you

weren't born in Ferrier, so you probably haven't experienced being stared at by other people."

Hermine certainly would have received admiring glances from other people in Saleilles, but she had probably never been scrutinized as a curiosity. In a similar way, Sara had lived a quiet life until now, so she had very rarely found herself in front of a large crowd of people.

I see... The prince is worried about me.

"Thank you. I wouldn't want to cause any problems for you, either, so let's do as you suggest and come home as soon as our business is done."

"I—I didn't think you would cause problems...", Richard mumbled.

He looked at Sara, his half-lidded eyes overflowing with tenderness. His irises were the same bright green that painted the fields of Ferrier, and Sara felt the tension in her chest relax just by looking at them.

"Anyway, this is also one of our official royal duties, so I suppose we have no choice but to make an appearance. Just don't leave my side during the party, all right?" Richard added, his voice serious.

Sara giggled and nodded.

"Yes, Your Highness."



THE sky was blanketed in darkness, threatening rain clouds on the evening of the party, as if the weather were reflecting Richard's inner turmoil.

"It's going to rain. That settles it—we're staying in today."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Daniel scolded Richard. "The party's not going to be canceled just because of a little rain. Besides, both of you are already finished getting ready, so it's kinda late to bring up such nonsense."

Richard stared back at him, stony and silent.

"Oh, Princess Hermiine! Please pacify His Highness with compliments so he'll want to go to the party!"

"What? Well... Your outfit is really lovely today, Your Highness. I'd be a very

lucky lady to go to the party on the arm of such a handsome man!”

With Daniel having suddenly shunted the task onto Sara, she had tried complimenting the prince’s outfit, but he didn’t seem flattered in the slightest.

Richard always wore dark clothes—his favorite style—but today, he was wearing shiny white formal attire. He usually thought very little about what he wore and tended to don slightly oversized shirts and pants. For this occasion, however, a tailor had been called in and had taken measurements, so the white outfit made for Richard today fit him like a glove.

Richard’s legs were long and slender, and even as he sat with one leg sloppily crossed over the other, he looked absolutely modelesque. The bottom hems of both his jacket and vest were embroidered with gold thread in an ivy pattern, which, together with the matching pale-gold necktie, added pleasing accent colors to the outfit.

Richard’s wavy slate-gray hair was neatly combed through and, because it was on the longer side, tied back with a ribbon. However, with all the humidity the looming rain clouds had ushered in, he seemed quite displeased with it.

Richard had insisted he would wear a mask the entire time, to which Edouard replied that he could, but it would have to be one that looked a touch better than his usual. Even Sara had chimed in that he shouldn’t wear his normal expressionless white mask to a party.

That was why today Richard wore, over his eyes only, a silver masquerade-style mask with feathers. It covered less of his face than his normal one, but it was elaborately made and beautifully decorated, so it looked quite appropriate with his handsome facial features.

Sara took all these points into account as she showered him with compliments, but Richard wrinkled his nose.

“I don’t think that’s true...”

“No, no, no! That won’t do, Your Highness! Now is not the time for modesty,” Daniel argued fervently. “You’re supposed to say, ‘Thank you, but you look much more beautiful than I.’”

But then *Sara* wanted to say, “I don’t think that’s true...”

Today, Sara was matching Richard—her dress was white with gold embroidery. It was also custom-made—her measurements had been taken for it at the same time as Richard’s—but no matter how long Sara had looked in the mirror, she couldn’t help thinking her own looks paled before the beauty of the dress.

Her hair was done up, tied with a ribbon that matched Richard’s. The dress was originally designed in an off-the-shoulder style, but the neckline had been changed in response to Richard’s vehement opposition. He had not been totally satisfied with the alteration, however, so he ordered her to wear a thin bolero on top of her dress.

The bolero, chosen by Richard, had a delicate pattern and was incredibly beautiful. Sara had also pinned the corsage keepsake from her mother to her chest, and with that on, she finally felt that, at the very least, she wasn’t doing the dress a disservice.

Richard’s mouth had opened slightly in surprise at Daniel’s scolding.

“Daniel’s right...,” he said. “You’re the one who looks wonderful. If I can walk alongside such a beautiful woman, then maybe going to this party won’t be so bad.”

“What?!” Sara squeaked.

“What do you mean, ‘What?’” He frowned at her.

“Oh! No, I mean... Thank you very much.”

Sara had never expected Richard to compliment her so candidly. When at last she had pushed through her confusion and thanked him, she sensed that, behind his mask, his eyes were smiling with an inward satisfaction.



THE party was held in one of the reception rooms of the castle. It was a small affair, with only some of the upper echelon of Ferrier nobility invited.

“Small” in King Edouard’s and Richard’s estimation, that is.

The venue wasn’t as large as the grand hall at the castle in Saleilles, but it was quite spacious, holding nearly one hundred aristocrats. Everyone was dressed

unusually warm for the season, perhaps due to the rain, and the collection of so many fuzzy coats and large hats was a tad overwhelming to Sara.

Just as they had discussed in advance, Sara and Richard had entered the castle holding hands like they had the last time they visited, and as soon as they had finished making their rounds, they sat together on a sofa to relax there as briefly as they possibly could before it wouldn't be considered impolite to go home.

But all things considered...the prince has been very alert and energetic tonight.

Sara looked at him, but his eyes were scanning the room. He didn't seem to notice that her attention was on him.

It hadn't been terribly long since Sara had last looked over at him like this. When some of the nobles had caught sight of the fabled prince and his consort and had come up to talk to them, Richard had surprisingly fielded their questions without any effort, even making it so that Sara didn't have to speak very much at all.

With how much he disliked being around people, she had been fully prepared to take the lead in their conversations, but instead, he had been the one helping *her* out.

"Um... Your Highness?" Sara whispered.

"What's the matter?" Richard responded immediately. "Are you tired? Are you thirsty? Do you want to go home?"

He had been looking around the room somewhat nervously, but the moment his eyes landed on Sara, his entire face relaxed. Sara picked up on the undercurrent of concern in his questions.

The prince can be so considerate...

"Well...thank you for taking care of everything. I wish I could have helped you more..." she said.

"Huh? Oh, when we were making our courtesy rounds? Don't worry about it. You haven't been living here for very long, and though I may be a recluse, I do remember the names and faces of all the nobles. It's also your first time

attending a party here in Ferrier, so you don't have to dive in head-first from the very start," Richard said kindly.

He gently placed his hand over the one Sara had been resting on her lap.

From somewhere in the room, Sara heard faint voices whispering, "Oh, my!" and "Look at the prince..."

"I try my best to avoid parties as a rule, but you can get used to them slowly. I mean, I rely on you most of the time, so you can rely on me now."

"What?! That's not true! You're always very dependable, and you've helped me so much more than I've helped you," Sara said honestly.

Richard sat up a bit straighter and pressed his lips together.

"I don't think that's true..."

"Well, I do."

"F-Forget it... Anyway, we've finished what we came to do, so let's go home. I want to go back to the villa and have you brew us some tea."

Sara laughed. "That sounds nice."

Richard flagged down one of the guards and arranged for their carriage home. Just as Sara was gazing at Richard's back, she suddenly caught a whiff of a strange smell and looked up.

It's a mix of water, dirt, and...mud?

No matter how hard it was raining outside, all the guests were wearing fresh clothes and had applied perfumes. Even the waiters and guards had been quite careful about their appearances. The smell couldn't have been coming from someone who had been indoors this whole time.

Sara's eyes quickly scanned the room. Just then, a waiter carrying a glass of wine atop a tray handed the glass to a guest and then started walking toward Sara.

She smelled rain coming off him.

"You're a demon!" shouted the waiter. "A demon that has deceived the Ferrier royal family! Go back to hell!"

A wineglass shattered. Someone shrieked.

A black shadow hovered above Sara.

The readied knife flashed white.

“Glory to the Ferrier royal family!”

The silver blade, raised high in the air, shone under the glow of the chandelier.

The sound of cloth ripping cut through the air. Someone screamed so loudly the room shook.

A piece of white cloth and shards of glass fell to the floor.

But there was no splash of blood.

At the last moment, Sara had sensed impending danger and swerved backward, so the knife that had been aiming for her heart had missed its target and instead only cut her bolero and corsage.

Wh-What?!

Sara slumped down onto the sofa in a daze, but the next moment, she saw something black flash across her vision.

“Augh!”

“Princess, this way!”

Something massive had lunged at the shadowy figure and pinned it to the floor. Sara could finally move freely, and one of the royal guards was pulling at her arm.

An enormous beast had wrestled a man she had never seen before to the ground. The man was bleeding profusely all over. His thigh had been deeply cut into, exposing a fresh wound.

Amid the party guests running around wildly as they tried to escape, the black beast roared and plunged its claws into the man’s abdomen. The man had been struggling against the beast, but at that moment, he let out a choked scream, twitched, and began to tremble feebly.

With that, Sara’s mind finally caught up to what she was witnessing.

She had almost been murdered by this man.

But this beast had lunged at him and was now trying to kill him instead.

The beast's fur looked like high-quality wool, but it was stained with blood. The creature bared its sharp fangs and growled... This beast was...

"Y-Your Highness..." Sara whispered, her voice barely audible.

It had looked like the beast was consumed with the thought of killing the man before him, but he twitched in surprise at Sara's words and looked back at her.

The beast's body was lithe, and he had a long tail. Under the light of the chandelier, Sara could see that his fur was dark gray.

He was roughly the size of a horse and had upright ears, sharp green eyes that rose at the outer corners, and long canine teeth, which were covered in blood.

The beast wasn't like a cat or a dog, and indeed it would have been difficult to describe it using any known species of animal. When he looked at Sara, his raging ferocity, incredibly, subdued. He climbed off the man's body with a soft *thud*.

The beast stared at Sara, without sparing a passing glance for the man now struggling to breathe.

Sara could recognize the smell of blood and animal, but she could also sense a lovely fragrance mingling among them.

"Your Highness..."

This time, she called out to him in a clear voice.

The beast growled out a sad noise and lay flat against the floor on the spot.

Sara approached him.

The way he had flinched at her voice was just like someone else she knew... She felt nearly overcome with emotion.

When Sara reached out her hand, the beast fell back and flattened his ears as if uncomfortable. If a cat or dog did that, it would probably mean they were scared.

But when Sara gently touched his fur, his tense body gradually relaxed. He

rubbed his cheek against the palm of her hand as he made grumbling sounds.

This is the power of the prince's ability...

The power that had tormented him for twenty years—the power that had driven his birth mother to make grave mistakes.

And because of Sara, he had just revealed that power publicly.

But Sara knew that the words she ought to say to him in that moment weren't "I'm sorry."

"Your Highness... Thank you for saving me," she whispered before throwing her arms around the black beast's neck. She could smell the gentle scent of Richard's sachet on his fur.





A bloody incident had occurred in the middle of a party at the royal castle.

An information blackout had been imposed on the townspeople, but it couldn't completely rein in the mouths of the more loose-lipped civilians.

"I heard the prince suddenly turned into the Black Beast!" said some with frightened looks on their faces.

"I heard the assassin called the prince's consort a 'demon'..." said others with grave expressions.

Still others muttered under their breath, "I heard when the assassin attacked Her Highness, he shouted, 'Glory to the Ferrier royal family!'"



AN investigation had been immediately launched into the attack against the prince's consort the night of the party. At the same time, Richard had been summoned to the castle, where he had remained. Sara, staying at the villa, hadn't been able to see him for several days.

"Claire! How is the prince? Is he doing okay?" she immediately asked when Claire returned from going to the castle on an errand. The maid answered with a reassuring smile.

"Yes, he's fine. But they seem to be having some trouble managing the rumors about His Highness's ability and questioning the criminal who attacked you."

Claire's words reassured her somewhat, but it also felt like Sara's chest had been stabbed with a giant spear.

This is all my fault...

Just the day before, Daniel had come to the villa to update her on the situation and had informed her, "There's a possibility the assailant may be from Saleilles."

When Sara was attacked, the man had screamed "You're a demon!" and "Glory to the Ferrier royal family!" so initially, they had assumed he was a

royalist extremist who hated Sara, but that seemed to not be the case.

The king had immediately arrested the Saleilles envoy who had been staying at the castle and had been trying to get information out of him, but the envoy had stubbornly repeated, “I don’t know that man,” and “Why would anyone from Saleilles try to hurt Princess Hermine?” so they seemed to be making little progress.

If I don’t tell them the truth, this problem will never be resolved. And if Saleilles gets wind of the issues in Ferrier, I don’t know what moves King Saleilles will make...

Sara started in realization and then glowered at the ceiling of her room.

Could that be his goal...? If so...then it’s about time I start preparing myself for the worst.



“PARDON my intrusion, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, dear sister! Thank you for coming.”

King Edouard greeted Sara with the same gentle smile as before, but it was clear from his face that he was exhausted from the party catastrophe. He was still in his late teens, but his face looked lined and haggard.

Sara had been led into the castle parlor, where the king, the queen mother, and Richard were all waiting for her.

Sara had asked a huge favor in having this meeting arranged, but when Richard looked up and his green eyes met hers, all she could think was—*I’m so happy to see him again.*

“Please excuse me,” she continued, politely addressing the king as she attempted to suppress the excitement bubbling up inside her. “Thank you very much for taking the time today to—”

“Yes, yes, that’s quite enough,” Edouard interrupted. “Isn’t there someone else who should be getting priority here?”

Sara’s head jolted up. She saw the smiling faces of the king and the queen mother, and then Richard sitting on the opposite side, awkwardly looking away

from everyone. Sara felt heat rise to her eyes.

“B-But...!”

“Then I’ll make it a royal order. Princess Hermine...go to your husband,” Edouard said in a tone of boundless kindness and regard.

Sara’s eyes rounded. She looked at Richard—and then ran to him.

Richard stood immediately.

“Y-Your Highness!”

“My dear wife...”

Sara jumped to him, and he caught her in his arms easily.

She was engulfed by his warm, gentle scent. Even in his beast form, that smell that Sara loved so dearly clung to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I...”

“Please don’t! You saved me! If anyone should be apologizing, it’s me, so please...don’t apologize!”

“You...”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. This is all my fault...”

As Sara wrung the words out, Richard’s arms stiffened around her.

Then he pulled her into a tight hug and pressed his forehead against the top of her head.

“It’s not your fault... No matter what you’re hiding, the one at fault is—is the person who tried to take your life. So please don’t apologize!”

“Your Highness... There’s something I need to tell you...”

“Yes, and of course I’ll listen. That’s why the queen mother and I are present as well... Come, sit down.”

Sara was usually the one soothing Richard, but this time it was the other way around. He led the sniveling Sara to the seat beside him. The king and queen mother watched them with smiles tinged with sadness.

“I’m so glad you two were able to be reunited... Now, dear sister... We are

currently proceeding with our investigation into the incident at the party, but I understand that you have something you urgently want to tell us regarding that night. May we hear it now?"

"Yes..."

Right.

This was why Sara had asked the king to take time out of his busy day for her.

She had spent enough time worrying and wavering over it. The only thing that came from that was a crisis that made the person most precious to her lose his dignity.

Something squeezed her hand.

Even without looking, Sara knew that Richard had grabbed her hand.

Your Highness...

His bright green eyes were surely looking in the same direction as hers.

Richard was prepared to support her courage and accept whatever she was about to say.

Sara took a few deep breaths and looked directly at the king and the queen mother.

"First, I'd like to apologize. I've...been deceiving everyone for a long time."

"....."

"I'm not Princess Hermine of Saleilles."



SARA spent quite some time explaining her birth, her circumstances in life, and the bits and pieces of her past that had brought her to this point in time.

She explained that she was the daughter of a baron, and that her parents had died in an accident when she was twelve years old.

She told them about how, afterward, she had been taken in by her second cousin, Hermine, and how she had started serving as her maid.

And that nearly a year ago, after Saleilles had been defeated, the king had

ordered her to take Hermine's place in a political marriage.

Sara had tried to omit her history with Firmin entirely, but when the king asked her how Princess Hermine could make it in the streets after losing her name and title, she had to explain.

Sara didn't feel any simmering bitterness when she told them about the love affair between her ex-boyfriend and her ex-master, but she could feel Richard quietly seething beside her, and when she had finished and the king exclaimed, "Ugh! What a pitiful excuse for a man," and the queen mother said, "Women should simply not behave that way...," Sara felt immense gratification.

Richard had quietly held her hand from the very beginning, but when Sara struggled for words, he gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and when she pushed through and explained everything, he nodded and listened intently.

"I see...," said Edouard. "So you were Princess Hermine's maid and were thoughtlessly manipulated into this by the royal family..."

"I'm so sorry..."

"There's no need to apologize. If you had exposed their secret before, Saleilles probably wouldn't have let you live, so you had no choice but to keep it inside this whole time... That damn king never learns his lesson. I shouldn't have just driven his troops out of Ferrier during the war—I should have asked for his head."

With the youthful features still clinging to his face, Edouard's grim suggestion seemed unthinkable. The queen mother, who had been sitting quietly beside him for some time, slowly opened her mouth.

"Hermine—no, Sara... As a matter of fact, I had a hunch about your true identity."

"What?" Sara and Richard asked at the same time.

"What on earth do you mean?" Richard continued. "You never told me anything like that!"

"I wasn't entirely sure of it myself... Sara, do you know about my ability?"

Sara shook her head.

“Right. I assumed as much... You know, don’t you, Richard?”

“Your ability is the power to read the memories of the objects you touch, right?” Richard asked, although he sounded uncertain. Sara tilted her head and looked at him.

“Memories...of objects?”

“Right,” he said. “I only found out about it a few years ago, myself. There are very few precedents for her ability—it’s considered incredibly rare.”

“Richard is right. When I touch something, I have the power to perceive the ‘world’ that object has experienced, although it doesn’t work for everything.”

The queen mother explained that many objects, like rings, decorations of military service, and well-used tea utensils, carried memories. They remembered the place where they were made, the person who bought them, the person who used them, if they were passed down to the next generation... It was like the queen mother could see the world that the object had “seen,” but in bits and pieces.

“I can only read memories from objects that have been in contact with human emotions for a long period of time. For instance, there is a good chance I could read the memories of heirloom swords and jewelry, but I can’t sense anything from scrap paper or a house that its owners haven’t poured a certain amount of their emotions into.

“And so...,” the queen mother continued, her green eyes turning to Sara. “Before, you let me hold your beloved corsage, remember?”

“I do... Wait! You’re not saying...”

A part of the corsage had been damaged when Sara was attacked, so she had thought it was strange when the queen mother had specifically told her to wear it during her visit today. Everything suddenly clicked into place.

The queen mother probably had an interest in Sara’s favorite corsage and wanted to try reading its memories.

And so—the queen mother must have realized before...

The queen mother nodded. “Would you let me hold it one more time?”

Sara nervously put the corsage on the tray offered to her. The queen mother took it in her hand, closed her eyes, and was silent for quite some time. She was silent for much longer than when she had held it during their first meeting—she must have been trying to get a clearer picture of the memories.

They all watched her wordlessly. Eventually, the queen mother slowly opened her eyes and smiled at Sara.

“The earliest memory the corsage has is of a low-ranking aristocratic man giving it to a woman as a gift. Shortly after, this woman wore it during a small wedding ceremony. The woman gave birth to a daughter and often let her touch it as well. The corsage also seems to remember the moment this woman died in an accident...”

Sara’s entire body started to tremble. Richard tightened his arm around her.

Surrendering herself to the warmth of his chest, Sara waited for the queen mother to continue.

“After the mother’s death, the corsage fell into the hands of her daughter, by then around twelve years old. The daughter met a girl who looked just like her, who then took the daughter back to the castle where she lived... Even after becoming an adult, you called out to the corsage when times were hard, didn’t you? After your marriage had been decided, I heard your voice hoping that you and Richard could be friends. The corsage remembers you speaking about your pain when you and Richard were at odds with one another.”

“Y-You could see that much?!”

Sara suddenly remembered when she had been on the boat to Ferrier. In an attempt to pump herself up for her new life, she had lined up Richard’s portrait and the corsage. She felt like she might have muttered some embarrassing things to them...

Sara paled and then turned beet red at the thought of all her past foolishness being out in the open, but the queen mother smiled and waved her hand.

“Oh, you don’t have to be so embarrassed! Last time, I could only catch fragments of memories, but they were so incongruent with what I expected of a

princess who had been utterly doted on by King Saleilles, so it struck me as strange. Visually, the memories were odd, but I couldn't pick up any sounds, either. Given how little information I'd been able to glean in so short a time, I couldn't confidently believe or disbelieve your identity... And while I hesitated, I ended up letting you get attacked by an assassin from Saleilles."

"No, that's not true! Um... Your Majesty, may I say something?"

"Yes, go ahead."

After the king and queen mother nodded, Sara sat up a little straighter.

"I wondered before if the person who attacked me was from Saleilles... But with this, I'm *certain* it was."

"Have you remembered something else?"

"...Your Highness, do you remember when I turned down the tea you prepared for me?" Sara asked, turning to her husband.

Richard's eyes widened, and he nodded.

"I do... Are you going to tell me what that was about?"

"Yes. To tell you the truth..."

As Sara told them that her tea had been laced with poison, the king's and queen mother's gazes briefly flickered to Richard. But as Sara continued to explain the situation, the two looked at each other, their expressions grim.

"There was poison in the tea gifted by the Saleilles envoy...?" asked Edouard.

"And you didn't put poison in Sara's cup, did you, Richard?" asked the queen mother.

"Of course not! I see now... So you were avoiding me because you thought I might have poisoned you..."

"Yes... I'm sorry for any confusion I may have caused."

"No, the one who tried to poison you is the one who made you so sad... Wait, then does that mean the poison was put in the tea tin beforehand?"

"I think so."

If the real Hermine had been there, she wouldn't have been sent poisoned tea. The scheme was likely thought up by the man who had given Richard the tin of poisoned tea—the envoy.

“I think...Saleilles was trying to get rid of me as Hermine. First with the poisoned tea, then with the attack... If the tin of tea was tampered with and the poison was only mixed into the tea leaves that would be used first, then no one would ever find a trace of poison, even if they investigated the tin afterward... Then they could pin my murder on the prince.”

“But even if they did that, there was no way of knowing for certain that Sara would be the only one to drink it, right?” asked the queen mother. “Richard just happened to drink something else that day.”

Richard looked up.

“No... When I spoke with the envoy, he politely dissuaded me from drinking it, saying the heavy taste would likely be too strong for me... He probably never realized she would smell the poison...”

“So because that plan failed, they attacked her at the party?” asked the queen mother.

“That's right,” said Edouard. “The real waiter was later discovered in a warehouse. The assassin had stripped him of everything... Now that I've heard the story from you two, I've made a few predictions of my own... Saleilles probably didn't care if their assassination attempts were successful or not.”

Edouard looked at each of their faces in turn before sighing.

“What they needed above all else is the ability to point to these attempts and say, ‘The people of Ferrier are trying to kill Princess Hermine.’ Having the assassin give a speech like he's a citizen of Ferrier before attacking Sara... If the assassination had been successful and Richard had finished off the murderer, the truth would likely have been lost to us forever.”

Both of the assassination attempts had been rather miraculously thwarted—first because of Sara's sense of smell, and then because of Richard's snap judgment.

“In any case, both plots were rather sloppy. Or rather—Saleilles was making

such a huge gamble that, if they had succeeded, it wouldn't have mattered if their plans *had* been a little sloppy."

Sara felt the weight of the king's words as if she had been stabbed in the chest. She hung her head.

"If I had told the truth sooner, your party would never have been ruined, and His Highness's secret would never have gotten out... I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. The seed of deceit had been planted by the Saleilles royal family from the start, was it not? Not only did King Saleilles reject the ceasefire condition that Princess Hermine would marry into this family from the very beginning, but he also tried to pin the crime on you, an innocent civilian. He even tried to kill you to ensure your silence... You've gathered more than enough grounds for us to start levying complaints, don't you think?" said Edouard, smiling with a far-off look in his eyes.

"He seems to have been making quite the fool of me because I'm young and inexperienced... I'll be bringing it up for a proper deliberation later, but it seems to me that we need to make the Saleilles royal family feel a bit of pain," he said. "Mother, Richard, what do you think?"

"If we don't respond, Saleilles will only continue to disrespect us," the queen mother replied. "Fortunately, they don't yet know that Sara has confided in us. If we are to strike, it should be now."

O-Oh my... The queen mother is quite hawkish...

Sara had assumed the queen mother would try to calm the king down, but it was quite the opposite. Her usually gentle, smiling eyes narrowed as she joined him in calling for an attack.

It was true, however, that if Ferrier didn't do anything, Saleilles would only get bolder in their assassination attempts. The next time they sent in their minions to take Sara out, there was even a possibility that innocent people, like Claire and the other servants, would get hurt.

Sara glanced at Richard. He held her gaze before nodding.

"Right. Let's get rid of them," he said resolutely.

“W-Wait, Your Highness!”

“All right, I’ll wait... For how many seconds?”

“You say you’ll ‘get rid of them,’ but...if you’re going to kill people, please only kill a few of them.”

Sara didn’t want to show clemency to King Saleilles. In fact, she didn’t really want to pardon Hermine, either, but she had already married as “Sara.” If Hermine would just quietly slink back into obscurity, Sara wouldn’t pursue her and just let her be.

Richard looked somewhat sympathetic.

“It’ll be all right. If we attack Saleilles, we won’t harm innocent civilians. We’ll probably only need to take out three people—the king, the princess, and your ex-boyfriend.”

He slipped those two into that list!

Apparently in Richard’s mind, Hermine and Firmin were just as reprehensible as the king, the one responsible for causing the war.

As Sara felt a surge of panic and a desire to pull at her hair, she tugged Richard’s coat sleeve to get his attention again.

“Wait, please. I don’t disagree with your plans for the king. I think it would even be better for Saleilles if the king were to abdicate and concede the throne to his son. But you don’t have to go as far as including the other two...”

“But don’t you hate them?” he asked.

“I do, but...we don’t have to go through all the trouble of chasing them down and taking revenge. I have no lingering attachment to either Firmin or Hermine, so I just want them to enjoy each other’s company out of my sight, no revenge necessary.”

In fact, Sara had only been sad for just half a day after hearing about Hermine and Firmin’s wedding.

Now, they were nothing but two people from her past. Sara detested that they were basking in happiness after treating her so poorly, of course, but she didn’t need Richard to take care of them like that.

“And I’m just going to add this so there’s no misunderstanding,” Sara continued. “I’m not saying this because I have any trace of compassion for them. I just don’t think those two are even worth the effort it would take to raise your hand against them.”

“So you don’t care about them anymore?”

“Exactly. I couldn’t care less if I tried.”

Richard looked at Sara with a somber expression, but eventually nodded.

“If that’s what you want, okay. But I’m only agreeing to not go after them. If they try to interfere with us, or if they insult you in any way, they’ll be just as much a target as the king. Is this okay with you, Edouard?”

“I don’t mind at all. I think the Saleilles crown should transfer to the prince. I heard that the prince rebelled against the king and was ostracized, unlike the princess. But I’ve heard that he is a good-natured young man who is open to having productive conversations. He should be able to hear us out. And if he tries to get in our way, we’ll get rid of him, too,” Edouard added casually.

King Edouard had heard correctly. Prince Alphonse, Hermine’s older brother, had long been estranged from the king for disagreeing with the king’s policies, so he spent most of each year out in the countryside by the king’s royal decree. He had even been titled “prince” instead of “crown prince” because the king had not recognized him as his successor.

Rumor has it that the king has plans to name a distant aristocratic relative as his successor, but then again, it would probably be easier for Ferrier to deal with a prince living in the countryside than a distant relative that has been influenced by the king...

A look of resolve came over Sara’s face. Edouard nodded and got to his feet.

“We will hold a council of war at once so we can make Saleilles pay the price for what they’ve done. Dear sister, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming here today and telling us the truth.”

“No. Thank you, Your Majesty, for your wise judgment. I’m just a fake princess, but...I humbly hope you’ll extend your kindness to the people of my homeland so that they may live better lives than the ones they’re living now.”

“You’re much more like a princess than the real one.”

The king smiled and left the drawing room with his mother.



THE jailed assassin had been tortured and had revealed that he *was* from Saleilles, and that his client had instructed him to kill the prince’s consort and then immediately commit suicide.

If the man had met this terrible fate while purporting to be a Ferrier citizen, the truth would have been lost in the shadows. But his plan had been foiled, and thanks to Sara’s confession, everything had been brought to light.

The Saleilles envoy who had been staying in Ferrier and was promptly imprisoned had also admitted his complicity in the assassination plot against Sara. When they examined the tin of tea leaves in Sara’s room, there was a small gap on the lid, just as the envoy said there would be. That was where he had slipped in a poisonous plant in such a way that it would fall out when Richard brewed the tea.

All this meant that Richard was once again being kept at the main castle. The days that they were unable to meet stretched on and on... However...

“Another one arrived today!”

“Thank you, Claire.”

After Sara’s breakfast, Claire had practically skipped over to hand her a simple white envelope. In brusque letters, the envelope was addressed *To my wife*, and on the back, *From your husband*.

“It still seems like the prince is too shy to call you by your name, Sara,” Claire teased.

Sara spared her an embarrassed smile before pulling out the letter from the envelope.

“It seems so. I’m so happy everyone is calling me by my real name now, but...I suppose Richard always did call me ‘you’ or ‘my wife.’”

The day that Sara had revealed the truth, she had turned to Richard after the king and queen mother had left and said, “I want you to call me Sara from now

on.”

But Richard always had his own particular rules, and he *hadn't* ever called her “Hermine” before. Sara had been incredibly grateful for that in the past, but now that she had disclosed her real identity, she *did* want the man she loved to call her by her name, after all.

But Richard's face had immediately turned red, and he had gently refused, saying, “I'll try, but I can't right now.”

Calling Sara by her name seemed to be incredibly embarrassing to him. She had thought that maybe it wouldn't be as bad writing it out in a letter...but even in his letters, he only addressed Sara directly as “you.”

She received letters from him every morning and evening. They were just short messages, such as *Did you eat enough today?* or *Is anything different?* But Sara was truly happy to be able to continue the routine of wishing him good morning and good night, even if in a letter.

But Richard had written slightly more in this one.

She soon understood why as she read through it.

“Claire, look at this,” she called out.

Claire perused the letter herself.

“I see... So they came to an agreement at today's meeting and have decided to dispatch troops to Saleilles.”

“And Prince Richard will be commanding the forces... Surely he must have volunteered for that himself, right?” Sara said.

“He must have. I can imagine him triumphantly putting his name forward, burning with the conviction to bring the people who hurt you to justice.”

I can certainly imagine that, too...

It seemed that Richard, having finally accepted the powers of his ability, had become rather keen on fighting as the Black Beast. He had already transformed in front of a room full of people to save Sara, so he couldn't dance around the truth anymore.

There would probably still be people in Ferrier who were prejudiced against him because he could transform his body, a power that had been despised for generations.

But Richard had come to grips with this and had still decided to go into battle as a member of the Ferrier royal family, openly transformed into his beast form.

All I can do is affirm and support Richard's choice...

And with that, Sara came to a decision on what she ought to do next.



WITH the council finally adjourned, Richard returned to the villa that night.

“Your Highness... I couldn’t wait for your return. Welcome back.”

“Yes, it’s good to be home.”

Sara had been waiting for him in the entrance, and as soon as he got inside, he drew her in with his long arms and held her tight against his chest.

It was just like when he had hugged her back in the castle parlor, when Sara had revealed the truth of her identity, but they had become closer than ever in the time since then, and Richard had started actively reaching out to touch her. Months ago, Sara could never have imagined being able to hug him like this.

But...surely Richard has the innate desire to be cuddled, too, right?

After thinking this, Sara gently stroked his hair. He seemed to enjoy it, nuzzling his cheek against the top of her head. He took a step back only to drape his arm around her shoulders as they walked together to the living room.

There, Claire was preparing tea. Sara and Richard sat beside each other and rested quietly for a few moments, sipping the tea Claire brewed, before diving into the topic at hand.

“So the council’s finished the first stage of planning, then?” Sara asked. “You must be exhausted.”

“I didn’t do much. I just listened to the plan while at Edouard’s side and told them I didn’t care about the particulars so long as I was given the job of eliminating the king.”

“R-Really?”

He truly was incredibly eager to take out King Saleilles. His level of enthusiasm did surprise Sara, but when she stopped to think about it, the king and queen mother had been very keen on that plan from the very beginning as well... Perhaps the Ferrier royal family were simply warlike in general...

Oh! That's right. I have to ask him about my request.

“So, about this plan to go to Saleilles... May I accompany you there?”

“Hm? Yes, of course you can. I don't mind.”

“What?! You don't?”

She had thought he would be a bit more hesitant, so his ready agreement was slightly anticlimactic.

“In fact, if you didn't offer, Edouard was going to approach you about it. When we go ashore, the townsfolk will almost certainly be wary of us, but if we're with you, it should put them at ease somewhat. You also know the layout of the Saleilles castle. If we get into a tight spot, we may have to rely on your expertise.”

“That's true...”

The king of Saleilles surely wanted to keep the princess-switch-up plan a secret until the very end. His envoy was locked away in the Ferrier castle jail, but the king probably had some inkling that his second assassination attempt had failed.

They had no idea if King Saleilles was becoming increasingly impatient, or if he was already discussing his next move with his prime minister, but they had to strike now, when the Saleilles civilians were still ignorant of the truth and the king was likely planning his next attack.

In a situation like that, Sara being there, acting as Princess Hermine, would surely keep the general public at bay.

“I'll take care of the basics of the operation, so you just stay by my side... Having said that, a commanding officer will lead an advance party, and they will move in before we even arrive. I want to preserve my strength as much as

possible until the time comes.”

“Yes, I think that’s a good plan,” said Sara, nodding.

For a while, Richard was silent, holding his cup of tea. Eventually he put it back on the table.

“You,” he addressed Sara. “You really...won’t regret doing this?”

“Do you mean invading Saleilles? Or your plan to attack the king?”

“Both.”

“...There’s no undoing what has been done. And the king has been the puppet master behind it all... If the current king falls, Prince Alphonse ascends the throne, and the people of Saleilles live happier lives because of it, then I will have no complaints or regrets.”

Sara may have felt resentment toward the king and Hermine, but she hoped her fellow countrymen—townsfolk who had showed her kindness when she was just the daughter of a baron and soldiers who were deployed in senseless disputes—would be kindly looked after.

Richard nodded.

“Of course. Edouard said he would consider the future of the civilians once he spoke with their prince. I’m sure he’ll be concerned about the townsfolk, even if they are Saleilles subjects.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“And also...”

Richard pressed his lips together. After fretting silently for some time, he continued in a quiet voice.

“I... About marrying you...I would like to reconsider it...”

“.....”

“This political marriage was invalid from the very beginning, so I will annul my so-called marriage with Princess Hermine of Saleilles, with the Saleilles party at fault. And then, I would like to enter a new marriage with you...Sara.”

Sara’s heart slammed against her rib cage.

That was the first time Richard had ever called her “Sara.”

He had called her the name given to her by her parents.

And he told her he wanted to marry no one other than “Sara.”

Sara blinked in speechless surprise. Richard must have misinterpreted her reaction—he suddenly broke eye contact, crossed his arms, and turned in the opposite direction.

“If you don’t want to, we can just annul the marriage and call it a day. But I wouldn’t want to marry Hermine, a terrible woman I’ve never even met before, and if I am to take a wife...I just thought it should be you. If you’re sick of me, I’m not going to force you.”

“...to....”

“What?”

“Of course I want to!” Sara shouted gleefully, throwing herself at Richard.

She seemed to have taken him totally off guard. He yelped a bit in panic, taken aback, but then he unfolded his arms and properly wrapped them around Sara.



His chest had a clean, soapy scent, and it felt warm when Sara nuzzled her cheek against it. His bony fingers were gentle as they clumsily stroked her hair.

“I’m so happy,” said Sara. “But...I’m just the daughter of a bankrupt baron. And... ‘Sara’ is legally married to Firmin...”

“No, their marriage is the same as ours. This ‘Firmin’ guy married Princess Hermine—she was just borrowing the name ‘Sara.’ To put it this way, we both married women under fake names, so the marriages have both been invalid from the beginning.”

Sara’s eyes widened at his logic.

“That’s true... Wait, then that means...”

“Even if they challenge us in court, we have a good chance of winning. This means that you—Sara—won’t have your reputation sullied. You are a single woman with no history of marriage at all. No one has the right to keep you from getting married.”

“But...my social standing...it’s...”

“Were I in Edouard’s position, that might have been an obstacle...but I’m just an illegitimate prince, born of a royal concubine and later adopted by the queen. I abdicated my right to the throne when I was still a child, so even if I marry and have children, they won’t interfere with the Ferrier line of succession at all. Edouard will probably marry his fiancée before long, and sooner or later I plan to retire from the royal family.”

That was the first Sara had heard of this!

“You’re going to leave the royal family?” she asked.

“Yes. Well, I had resigned myself that my plan would be more difficult to carry out once I had married the princess of Saleilles, but...if I were to marry the daughter of a baron, I could become an ordinary subject much more freely. Oh... Unless you’d rather remain the wife of a prince? If that’s the case, I’ll just call off these plans—”

“No, no! Please don’t even think of flippantly changing something so important to you on my account!”

Sara was incredibly grateful that Richard cared so much about her, but she knew if she ever told him, “I’d like to be the queen of a kingdom,” he would genuinely go lay siege to some kingdom and wrest the throne away. The sheer authority and physical strength Richard possessed was a little startling at times.

“I don’t care about what my social standing is in life...as long as I can be by your side!”

“Sara...”

“You, looking me in the eye and calling me by my name like this...that’s enough for me. And when I lived with my parents, I used to lend a hand to the family business and people around town, so even if we’re working nobility, that’s fine with me!”

Richard laughed.

“You’re right. If I can be with you, I think it would be nice to work as an ordinary citizen.”

Richard laughed again and wrapped his arms around Sara’s waist.

“Let’s go to Saleilles, Sara... We’ll cut away all our loose ends there, and then we’ll come back here together.”

“Yes... Your Highness?”

“Yes?”

“I love you... From the bottom of my heart.”

Chapter 5: The Princess's Smile

THE date of Sara and Richard's departure was fixed without a hitch, an army of mutants was assembled for the battle, and they set out to begin the invasion of Saleilles with Prince Richard as their commanding officer.

As the officer leading the charge, Richard was wearing his traditional military uniform. It was a crisp, light blue color, almost as if it reflected the cloudless sky above. Draped in a cloak embroidered with the crest of the Ferrier royal family, Richard looked positively regal, yet also valiant. His maskless profile looked so dignified and serene, it was almost hard to believe that just six months before he had been called the "Hermit Prince."

As his consort, Sara wore a matching blue gown. It was technically a dress, but it had been custom-made by Claire specifically in preparation for that day. It looked far removed from the extravagant dresses one would wear to a ball—it had included design accents, like buttons and epaulettes, borrowed from Richard's own military uniform. It was made of a thicker fabric, and the skirt of the dress was shorter, only going down to Sara's calves, so it exposed her lace-up boots.

After bidding Claire and Daniel, who would be holding the fort down at home, a temporary farewell, Sara and Richard had set off in a carriage. Sara gestured toward the townsfolk who had gathered on the main street.

"Your Highness, look... The people are—"

"I know."

The citizens were offered a clear view of the prince and his wife riding in the carriage as they led the procession toward the harbor. The general commotion grew louder as people crowded together to see them off.

Sara glanced beside her and noticed that Richard's hands were closed into tight fists. He wore white gloves, but with how tightly he was clenching, she would wager his veins were bulging on the back of his hands.

It was his first time being seen in public since his ability had been revealed, and he was frightened of how the public, who had loved him for so long, would think about him now—what they would say about him...

“Your Highness...”

“.....”

“Look out the window. Look at their faces.”

Sara grabbed his hand and put her other arm around his shoulder, even though she knew it wasn’t long enough to reach around him fully.

There were no curtains on the windows of the carriage, so they could clearly see the faces of everyone lined up on the main street.

They seemed a little cautious, but as soon as Richard lifted his head and looked out the window...

“Good luck, Your Highness!”

“The Black Beast has always been our protector! Thank you, Your Highness!”

“Prince Richard, please be safe!”

Cheers of “Your Highness” soon spread throughout the crowd, merging into a unified chant that rippled down the street toward the harbor. As the rows of people chanted, Sara gently looked at Richard.

His green eyes were wide as he stared out the window in amazement.

Sara gently poked the back of his hand. After hesitating a moment, he brought up his hand in an awkward wave.

A thundering cheer erupted immediately, and the voices screaming praises for Richard grew louder still.

Everything will be okay. You’ve devoted yourself to this kingdom for so long, and everyone can see your unwavering resolve.

“Sara...”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been...terrified of this power my entire life. But now...I feel grateful.

Everyone knowing the truth...I think it's better this way."

His trembling voice quieted to a murmur until, unable to bear it any longer, he lowered his head and hid his face in Sara's shoulder.

Sara held her husband as his shoulders shook with emotion. She closed her eyes and carded her fingers through his wavy hair.

I know everything will be okay.

Sara and Richard would carry out their duties and then come home to Ferrier.



BEFORE they had left the castle, the queen mother had pulled Sara aside.

"There's something I want to tell you before you go back to Saleilles."

Sara braced herself, wondering what it could be. Sadness flickered in the queen mother's eyes.

"I read the memories of your parents from the corsage, but...I've learned some more about them."

The other day, Sara had asked the queen mother to examine the corsage once again. Sara had just been hoping to find out a little more about her parents, but the way the queen mother phrased it made it sound as though some unexpected revelation had come up instead.

The queen mother looked a bit out of sorts, but Sara had been the one who asked her to do this. So, when Sara nodded, the queen mother began:

"I discovered something about your family and your parents... You were told that your family's business failed and that your parents died in a terrible carriage accident, but..."



SALEILLES—the kingdom where Sara had spent eighteen years of her life. When she stepped onto its soil after a nearly six-month absence, the harbor felt different from what she remembered.

After Sara and Richard walked off the ramp, they were greeted by a large, bearded man.

“Oh, Prince! Princess! We’ve been awaiting your arrival.”

The man wore silver armor, and from the crest on his chest, Sara could tell he was a member of the Ferrier army. He was massive—he looked like he could mow down his enemies with his brute strength alone, no ability necessary.

Behind him stood about twenty Ferrier troops wearing the same silver armor. When they saw Sara, they fell to one knee in unison.

She looked at Richard, who whispered, “He’s the commanding officer of the advance party.” Then he looked down at the soldiers and gave a composed nod. “I appreciate you welcoming us. And you’ve done very well in securing the harbor town.”

“It wasn’t all that much work, Your Highness,” the commander said in a low voice. “I was fully prepared for a battle at first, but perhaps the memory of their defeat last year was too fresh, because we were able to subdue the town without much resistance at all.”

Then the officer looked at Sara, and his grim face relaxed into a smile.

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Your Highness. Don’t worry about a thing—the civilians of your homeland all accepted our persuasions very sincerely.”

“It’s nice to meet you as well. Thank you very much for securing the harbor town, but...there weren’t many injuries, were there?”

“There were not. His Highness drilled the order into us that we were not to harm the general public or soldiers who didn’t want to fight, so we were able to keep injuries on both sides to a minimum and succeed in securing the road to the royal capital.”

He—he said that so indifferently, but it must have been quite difficult...

Sara suddenly looked at the harbor town more closely. Some Ferrier soldiers were scattered around the downtown area, but they were few in number. There were about twenty people gathered in front of her, and according to what Richard had told her beforehand, there was supposed to be around fifty in the advance party.

This is Saleilles’s top naval port... Even with the troops permanently stationed

here, they couldn't win against a few dozen abilities...

It was easy to see how reckless the war Saleilles had waged against Ferrier one year ago really was...

Just as the bearded commanding officer had told her, there were barely any signs of a struggle around her and not a trace of black smoke anywhere. Seeing Ferrier's national flag hung from the spire of the lord's manor in the middle of town indicated that the Ferrier army had secured the port with virtually no bloodshed.

Maybe the Saleilles troops barely exerted any effort to defend it... Maybe the deep-seated fear lingering from their previous defeat was too strong...

That had been a wise decision of the lord and the soldiers. This bearded commander was probably incredibly skilled—and then there was Richard, who had killed many Saleilles soldiers in the last war. Sara was very grateful that the ocean of the seaside town was not dyed red.

Before long, a middle-aged man walked up to them, accompanied by more Ferrier troops. He was reasonably well-dressed, so Sara assumed he was probably the lord who presided over this harbor. His face was pale, but there was no evidence of assault. He had likely prioritized the civilians' safety over putting up a fight, even if that meant giving up his town to the invaders.

Seeing how the lord trembled before the prince of an enemy kingdom, Sara lightly pulled at Richard's sleeve. Richard nodded, seeming to guess her intentions, and so she walked forward and curtsied before the lord.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Hermine, the consort of Prince Richard."

"Hermine... Princess Hermine?!"

"Thank you very much for your decision to surrender the harbor."

Sara gave the wide-eyed lord her most princess-like smile and gestured toward the Ferrier troops, with the bearded commander standing in front of them.

"As I'm sure they told you, the Ferrier army is only after the king. I promise they will not raise a hand against you or your people."

“P-Princess... Is it really true? Ferrier and you...against King Saleilles...?”

“Yes, of course it’s true. I also have one correction for you.”

Sara tilted her head, took the folding fan from her waist, and snapped it open.

“I am not your princess. Address me as ‘consort of the prince of Ferrier.’”



“**YOU** were quite the actress back there,” Richard teased.

The harbor town had been totally surrendered, and Sara and Richard were currently sitting in a carriage that was taking them to the royal capital.

Sara huffed and gave him a sideways glare. “You know I’m the last person who would want to do that. But I had to put pressure on him...”

“Yes, of course. What you did was a huge help, Sara,” Richard said, cheerfully wrapping his arms around her and rubbing his cheek against the top of her head.

He nuzzles my head like that a lot... I wonder if that’s a behavior influenced by the Black Beast?

For now, Sara just stroked his soft hair. He snuggled closer to her, seemingly in an even better mood. If she had to pick an animal to describe his beast form, she’d say it was closest to a dog, but this behavior was much more like a cat.

But Richard must be worried, too.

Just as that thought crossed Sara’s mind, Richard straightened slowly so he wouldn’t accidentally push her arm away.

“And it made me happy...what you said before,” he said softly. “When you told him you weren’t the princess of Saleilles, but the consort of the prince of Ferrier, you were so dazzling.”

“I-I’m sorry...did I go too far with that?”

“No! Our marriage may be a lie, but to everyone else, you are a foreign prince’s consort, so it was just a little reminder, right? Although...it didn’t exactly feel wonderful, hearing him call you Hermine,” he added a little sulkily before facing forward.

Sara mirrored his movements, sitting up a little straighter and looking out the window at the road.

The road they were on was a trade route, stretching north from the harbor town to the royal capital of Saleilles—and the castle. Sara had been born and raised in the royal capital, but she was really keeping an eye out for the castle, where she had spent many years as a maid.

“In any case,” the queen mother had told her after revealing the truth, “please do whatever you think is best. I know your parents are watching over you from heaven, hoping you’ll live your life with your eyes set on the future.” Then she had given Sara one final hug.

Sara could never have expected that revelation, and it only added more fuel to her desire for revenge against the king of her homeland.

But there is a slight possibility that the queen mother misread the corsage’s memories... So I have to hear and see the truth for myself.

Richard’s eyes softened, and he watched Sara as the flame of determination burned brightly in her brown eyes.



AT the end of their two-day journey, they arrived at the royal capital, but the bearded commander of the advance party informed them that the massive gate of the city had been closed.

“The front gate is only ever closed in extreme circumstances...,” said Sara.

They stood atop a small hill that overlooked the royal capital. Richard had set up a makeshift encampment there and was peering down at the city.

“The advance party have already gone to demand a bloodless surrender, correct?” asked Richard.

The commander nodded with a grim expression. “That’s right. And I sent a soldier with a flying ability, so even if they reject our call for surrender, our troops should be able to get out safely... Oh!”

As soon as the words left his mouth, a thin pillar of smoke shot high into the air from the direction of the castle, followed by a petite young man supporting

two fellow soldiers under each arm, flying—literally flying.

I-I do remember reading a book that mentioned a flying ability... He's really flying...!

Sara, never having seen this ability before, watched with wide eyes. The young man flew all the way to their hill, then safely and lightly landed in front of Richard. The two large men he carried touched down alongside him.

"Reporting back. You can probably already guess what happened, but the prime minister delivered Prince Richard's letter to King Saleilles and...he tore it to shreds. He even tried to have us arrested, so we escaped."

"Good work, soldier," said Richard. "I'm glad you made it back in one piece. I did foresee this happening as soon as I saw that the gates were closed, but... they've made it clear they're not going to accept our demands."

He shrugged and looked at the castle, his bright green eyes narrowed.

In the letter, Richard had written in the politest terms possible, *We desire a bloodless surrender. We request that an environment is prepared in which King Saleilles and Prince Richard may talk to one another.* The diplomatic attempt, however, had been unsuccessful.

Richard told me before that if the king accepted his demands, he would only pull him off the throne and rough him up a bit, but now...

Now it seemed that Richard's last attempt at mercy would go to waste.

Sara sighed. Richard looked at her, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"You overheard that soldier just now, I believe... Now that King Saleilles has rejected our offer, we have no choice but to force our way through to him. Will you be okay with that?"

"...Of course," she said resolutely.

In fact, it had been nothing short of a miracle that Sara had been able to persuade Richard to shift his initial conviction that "the king must die" to a more lenient position of "if he doesn't agree to our demands, *then* the king must die."

King Saleilles had ruined that miracle all by himself, so Richard wouldn't be

giving him any further concessions. Even Edouard had told him, “If King Saleilles is disrespectful, just kick his ass.”

Richard heaved a troubled sigh and looked back at the soldiers gathered on the hilltop.

“This is what it boils down to... Our troops will move to overtake the royal castle. But remember that the one who tore my letter to shreds and tried to detain our men was the king. Our goal is to reach the throne room, but avoid harming those simply following their king’s orders as much as we can.”

“What about the shock troops, Your Highness?” asked the bearded commander.

Richard looked away in thought for some time before glancing at Sara.

“Sara... We will be storming the capital. That soldier can fly to the castle with his ability, but he can only carry two people at once. Not only would that place a huge burden on him, but if we send in so few soldiers at a time, they’ll be overwhelmed by the sheer number of enemy forces. It would also open up the possibility of being pincered from behind, so we have to launch our siege from inside the capital city. And so...I will join the battle.”

“...As you wish, Your Highness,” she said, giving him her blessing.

“Sara...”

“Just...please don’t forget your promise, okay?”

Sara’s response probably sounded like she was all too happy to leave everything to him—like she had no will of her own.

Richard’s eyebrows were pressed sharply together, and his arms were folded. Sara smiled at him and lightly touched his sleeve.

“Your promise that you and I will return to Ferrier together. I’m not going back by myself, and I’m not going back with you in pieces.”

A small wave of relief washed over Richard’s solemn grimace.

“Yeah... Right.”

With that, Sara and Richard were surrounded by their own bubble of peace,

and it became clear to everyone that an invisible thread bound them to each other.



THE Ferrier camp was set up on a nearby hill, and the massive gate of the royal capital was firmly shut to keep them out.

The iron gate was famed to be able to repel any weapon and be impervious to damage from the claws of any beast. However, when the Ferrier mutants with explosive powers directed their attacks at the gate, it was blasted to pieces.

“That’s strange...,” said the bearded commander. “Should it have broken that easily?”

“Well, um... That gate was built the same time the capital city was, hundreds of years ago, and since then, everyone’s boasted about the invincible iron, but...”

“I get it... This ‘invincible iron wall’ was a story of the past, but the barrier that stood in our way just now was nothing more than an old wall with little more than fables keeping it strong in the peoples’ eyes...”

The young man with the flying ability ran up to them and kneeled. “Excuse me, Your Highness...,” he said to Sara. “We’ll be going in soon.”

“Right,” Sara said, nodding.

The bearded commander started giving orders to his troops. Sara made her way down the hill.

Didn’t I play on this hill as a child with my mother and father?

On a warm spring day, they had come there for a family picnic, her mother carrying a flower basket and her father carrying a bag with packed lunches for the three of them.

Sara was very young then. She had run around the sprawling meadow, tumbling around and chasing butterflies. She picked flowers with her mother, they ate the lunch boxes a servant had prepared for them, and on the way home, Sara had gotten so sleepy that her father carried her on his back.

It was a very strange feeling, seeing the Ferrier army marching on this hill of

her memories. An enemy of Saleilles tromped over the soil, but Sara didn't feel angry. Was this because she trusted them, or because she had exhausted any goodwill she had toward King Saleilles?

At the bottom of the hill, smoke rose from the crumbling remnants of the gate explosion. The Ferrier soldiers watched as the townsfolk ran in panic, trying to get away, as they had never imagined that the iron wall could be destroyed. But the soldiers just observed calmly—it was much better that the people were running inside than staying out in the road.

Richard was staring intensely at the castle. But he turned around, seeming to sense Sara's presence, and the corners of his thin lips turned upward slightly in a smile.

"Are you ready, Sara?"

"Yes... Let's go."

He offered his hand, which she took.

Standing like that, they looked like a pair of married aristocrats on their way to a dance party, but in reality, they were walking toward a city filled with dust and smoke.

Flanked on either side by specialized attacking forces, Sara swallowed hard and walked over the crumbled gate.



SARA hadn't been back to the royal capital in over six months, and it smelled kind of dusty.

Huge pieces of debris were scattered everywhere and almost hindered their progress, but before they could come to a complete stop, a Ferrier soldier made a motion like he was grabbing something in midair—one piece of debris nearly the height of an adult man levitated into the air and was tossed to the side. It was like a stronger version of Daniel's ability.

Sara looked around the city that was in an uproar and sighed. The people here probably didn't know that the king had refused Ferrier's demands, but with the gate being closed, then destroyed, and then the city being stormed by mutants,

they probably had a general idea of what was happening right now.

Sara heard snippets of people muttering.

“It’s Princess Hermine...”

“Why is the princess doing this...?”

“Is that really the prince of Ferrier...?”

“She’s betrayed her own kingdom?”

Sara ignored them completely, and they were all silenced by a scowl from Richard.

The Ferrier soldiers were prepared to fight if anyone dared to try harming Sara or Richard, but they probably didn’t have to worry about that for the time being.

Civilians who had no power to fight were fleeing from the main street as fast as their legs would take them, and although Saleilles had successfully roped in patrolmen (who seemed hardly any different from the regular townsfolk), they were trembling and clearly unused to handling the spears and swords gripped in their hands. Sara’s heart sank when she noticed they were all young, nearly the same age as her.

Usually, they would have dispatched the army for something like this... Did they not have time, or are they concentrating those forces to protect the castle?

If it were the latter, any desire for clemency in Sara would be dashed entirely.

“Well—now we must prepare ourselves for the possibility that this battle will turn bloody,” said the bearded commanding officer, who caught up with them after leading the group bringing up the rear.

Sara nodded and looked up at the front door of the castle.

The castle where Sara had served for six years.

For six years, she believed that Hermine’s happiness was her own happiness.

And now she had returned to destroy it.



RICHARD gave one final ultimatum, demanding an unconditional surrender, but the only response was a downpour of arrows shot at them from the third-floor balcony.

“Good grief... And with their princess standing right here, although she’s not anymore...,” said the bearded commander.

“The king must have surprised them and ordered them to not show Hermine any mercy... She’s not his real daughter, at any rate.”

Richard and the bearded commander discussed this all rather calmly.

A massive dome-shaped barrier of light had been cast around them, with Sara at the center, and it deflected all the arrows that rained down on them like hail, leaving them scattered in pieces at their feet.

The archers on the balcony seemed to grasp that their arrows were ineffective—by the time the mutant soldier had taken down his barrier of light, they had already left the balcony. Had they retreated to prepare for their next assault, or had they realized there was no chance of victory and fled? The latter would give Sara more peace of mind...

But the king had strengthened the defense of the castle, so that doesn’t give much hope.

Sara’s breath caught in her throat the moment they opened the massive front doors and saw just how many soldiers were inside.

I’ve—I’ve never seen so many!

King Saleilles must have gathered every single soldier and knight that normally guarded the capital city. They looked totally different from the civilians and makeshift guards in town—they were equipped with armor and shields bearing the Saleilles coat of arms, and Sara could sense that they each had an unshakable fighting spirit.

“Soldiers! Eliminate the Ferrier army, including Prince Richard and the traitor Hermine!”

Sara felt tears spring to her eyes the moment she heard the man’s resounding voice.

He was a knight commander who had looked after Sara since she was little. She remembered him two years ago, when he excitedly came up to tell Hermine that he had been promoted to commander.

Sara's hands balled into fists. She dashed the tears from her eyes and took a step forward.

"Everyone, listen to me! His Royal Highness, Prince Richard of Ferrier, has come here as a representative of Ferrier to bring the current king to justice for waging his senseless war against Ferrier that took the lives of so many people!"

"Your Highness, what are you—"

"Don't you see the truth?! Some of you lost family members in the war last year, didn't you? And after Saleilles's defeat, you felt the king's heavy taxes, the ones he levied to pay the reparations of the peace treaty, didn't you? How many lives would have been saved had he not rose against His Majesty the King of Ferrier?!"

The knight commander quickly reached for his sword.

"Silence! How dare you speak with such derision against His Majesty—"

"*You* be silent, Knight Commander Henry Jean! The king has shown Ferrier nothing but disrespect. His policies have been utterly absurd, and as someone who had aspired to be a knight since you were a child, you should know that!"

The knight commander had once told Hermine this, but also Sara, who hovered around the princess like a shadow.

He was just a junior knight at the time, but he had seemed like a friendly older-brother type. He cheerfully told them about his dreams for the future, saying, "One day, I want to be a full-fledged knight who protects the people of Saleilles."

The knight commander froze at Sara's words. Through the eyeholes of his helmet, she could see that his eyes were bulging, darting this way and that like he was recalling some memory.

The knights around him exchanged puzzled looks at their commander's stillness.

Maybe he can finally hear what I'm saying!

"Henry Jean... You used to play with me a lot when I was a kid, remember? I didn't abandon Saleilles. If King Saleilles stays on the throne, this kingdom will perish. You will never be able to help build the beautiful kingdom you always dreamed of... That's why I'm helping Prince Richard."

"She's right, Knight Commander...," added Richard. "I was given an order by my brother, the king of Ferrier, and that was to punish the king who made a mockery of our kingdom. I don't plan on harming innocent civilians or even beginning this unnecessary battle here. You and my wife seem to have some sort of friendship, so I would like to ask for your support."

Richard spoke evenly, but he seemed to choose each word with great care. Perhaps because of this, the knights gave one another uneasy looks.

This might work...

Sara nodded and continued to speak. "Henry Jean. Please listen to us. Your soldiers... They won't be able to win against the prince and Ferrier's mutants."

The knight commander looked aghast, but Sara continued.

"King Edouard of Ferrier wants Prince Alphonse to take the throne. If that wish is realized...I know Prince Alphonse will build a better kingdom than the one you have now. He will build the kingdom you've always hoped for."

The knight commander blinked, digesting what she said. He opened and closed his mouth several times. The voice that escaped his lips sounded like a sigh.

"Princess Hermine, are you...? No, you're... *Guh!*"

"Huh?!"

Just as the knight commander began to say something, he grunted in pain, pressing the side of his torso as he fell to his knees with a crashing sound.

Dark scarlet blood spilled out from under his hand.

"C-Commander?!" one Saleilles soldier cried.

"Those goddamn mutants... How could they do that to the commander?!"

The troops grew enraged at the sight of their wounded commander and readied their weapons.

Ferrier's bearded commander immediately pulled Sara back. She found herself surrounded by Ferrier troops. A low growl escaped Richard's lips.

H-How did Henry get hurt?!

"Wh-What's going on?! No one...no one attacked him, right?!"

"Of course not! I couldn't see very clearly, but I think the attack came from over there!"

We're being set up!

But by the time Sara realized this, it was too late.

The knights, under the impression that their commander had been the victim of a surprise attack, drew their swords and spears in unison, brimming with bloodlust.

"Kill them! Kill every last monster from Ferrier!"

"Your Highness, this way!" said the bearded commander, pulling Sara toward the young soldier who could fly. "Persuading them is impossible like this!"

"R-Right!"

Sara grabbed hold of the young soldier's arm. He wrapped an arm around her and leaped into the air right on the spot, flying so high up they nearly grazed the ceiling of the ludicrously tall entrance hall.

But Richard had not taken the man's other hand. He threw off his cloak, let out an earth-shattering roar, and transformed into the Black Beast.

Sara shouted in surprise.

"Y-Your Highness!" Sara cried out immediately.

"It's dangerous down there!" the young soldier told her. "The prince and his troops will take care of this area—let's go on ahead and look for the king!"

Sara gasped.

That's right...they had to go farther into the castle to topple the king. And of

everyone in the Ferrier army, Sara was the only one who knew the places where the king was likely to be.

Her resolution hardened, but as she heard the screams and the dull sounds from under her feet and smelled the putrid odor of blood assaulting her nose, she thought she might faint.

Right... This is a battlefield!

This was what it was like the last time Richard had fought in battle.

High up as she was, Sara could smell the stench of blood, despair, and death.

“I’ll take us somewhere safe, Your Highness,” said the young man. “Just don’t look down.”

Sara managed to nod. She pressed a hand against her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut, but she could still clearly hear the soldiers’ cries and the explosions the mutants of the Ferrier army fired at the Saleilles forces.

Amid the chaos, Sara heard an indistinct roar of a beast—her chest seized painfully with anxiety.

Everyone... Your Highness... Please be safe!

The young man kicked against the air below him to fly forward, Sara still securely in his arms. Eventually, they landed on the third-floor balcony. After catching their breath for a few moments, they began to consider the king’s whereabouts.

“We need to get the king before the second wave comes,” said the young man. “Do you know how to get to the throne room or his office?”

“I do, but...now that I think about it, he’s more likely to bolt than stay here, perched calmly on his throne.”

“Ah, so he’s a coward... Right. Then we also need to hit the places he might use as an escape route.”

Once Sara had seemed to calm down a bit, the young soldier flew off with her again. With Sara’s guidance, they landed in a deserted hallway. As soon as they touched the floor, they heard a stampede of footsteps approaching them. Before the source came into view, Sara picked up on the thick smell of blood.

Her breath came out faster.

I can't run away. I've made up my mind to do this!

The first thing she saw rounding the corner of the hallway was a jet-black beast.

"Your Highness!"

Sara spread out her arms. Richard came to a sudden stop in front of her and made a quiet sound. It was clear to see why he didn't run to her—his fur was stained with a dark color, and blood was dripping from his half-open mouth.

After thinking about what Richard would want in this situation, Sara lowered her arms and gently pet a spot near his back that wasn't too dirty.

"I'm so glad you're safe," she said softly.

"Your Highness!" came a loud voice. "Thank goodness you're all right!"

The bearded commander and the rest of the troops had caught up to Richard. Some of them were splashed with blood and covered from head to toe with scratches, but their numbers didn't seem much fewer than before.

"I'm only unhurt because of this brave soldier," Sara explained. "Is everyone okay?"

"A few people were wounded, so I ordered them to retreat to the hilltop at once. But there were no fatalities on our side, so you can rest easy."

"Right..."

Sara only just stopped the grimace threatening her mouth by clamping her back molars together.

The commanding officer said there were no fatalities—*on their side*. He didn't say whether there were any on the other side...the Saleilles knights.

And judging from how much blood they were covered in...

No! I've already decided that I'll see this through to the end!

After shaking her head, Sara pointed toward the throne room.

"The throne room is over there, and his office is almost directly above it. He

might very well be in one of those places, but I also think there's a possibility he's trying to make his escape as we speak."

"Understood. We drove the enemy out from the front entrance, but we have no idea when the next wave will appear. Let's find the king at once," said the commanding officer, nodding and then giving his troops instructions.

Sara headed to the throne room with Richard and some Ferrier soldiers. Along the way, she looked down and realized her right hand was stained red.

Because I touched Richard's fur...

Sara closed the hand into a fist and looked forward.

They were fighting to prevent any further bloodshed—from either kingdom.

They charged into the throne room and then the office in turn, but the only people there were aristocrats who had been left behind or servants trying to escape—the king was nowhere to be found.

These people were clearly not fighters. They took one look at the massive beast covered in blood and fell to the floor, begging, "Forgive me!" or "Please spare me!"

Among them, there were faces Sara recognized... Naturally, she couldn't get personally involved to help them escape, so she only told them, "Get out of here—quickly," and then went with the others to check the other rooms one by one.

"Prince, Princess! Look over there!" said the bearded commander.

Sara and the others stopped so abruptly, the momentum nearly pitched them forward.

The commander pointed toward the back gardens of the castle, where a pillar of familiar white smoke shot upward into the air.

"A smoke signal...? The king escaped all the way to the back gardens?!"

"You two go on ahead! We'll be right behind you!"

Sara parted temporarily with the bearded commander and wrapped both arms around the young soldier who could fly. It was probably improper of her

to be clinging to a man other than her husband, but the young man needed both arms free to hold Richard in his beast form, so she didn't really have a choice.

Richard's beast form looked quite heavy, but the young man kicked off with the same weightlessness as before, jumping into the air and clearing several of the castle buildings as he headed straight for the back gardens.

Behind the back gardens, there was a small villa where princes and princesses lived when they were very little and where queens would prepare to give birth. Sara had been there several times before with Hermine, and she vaguely remembered one of the chamberlain chaperones telling her, "There are many escape routes in this villa."

That's right... It's the best place to escape in secret...

It would be one thing if King Saleilles were some sort of prisoner on the run, but how could a king abandon his own castle in the middle of battle?

Sara controlled her urge to sigh. They all landed on the second-floor terrace of the villa. Sara adjusted her skirt and walked through the rather dramatically shattered glass door Richard had just pulverized as he crashed inside.

The advance party must have set off the smoke signal after finding out the king's exact whereabouts, because by the time Sara and the others rushed into the small parlor, the king was already lying on the floor, both hands bound.

All the knights who had presumably been guarding King Saleilles were piled high in a corner of the room. Sara started for a moment, but then felt relieved when a Ferrier soldier whispered, "They're all alive."

"Prince. Princess," said one of the soldiers.

"Great work, everyone," Sara said, since Richard was in beast form. "Excellent job tracking him down here."

"The prime minister surrendered very quickly. He tried negotiating for his life by saying he would tell us where the king was planning to escape to, so we arrested him."

"I see... Right, then."

The prime minister had served the king for many years, but he must have valued his own life too much in the end.

Sara sighed and walked up to the middle-aged man on the floor.

This is the person who violated the treaty with Ferrier.

This is the person who made me stand in for his daughter.

This is the person who sent an assassin to kill me as Hermine.

And this person was...

“How do you do, Your Majesty?”

Sara had meant to greet him in the most cheerful and ladylike manner she could, but both her voice and her clenched fist trembled like her whole body was spasming.

It was then that the king, who had been lying facedown, seemed to notice for the first time that Sara was right in front of him. Rolling around, he looked up at Sara with wide eyes, and then his face distorted into a disgusted scowl.

“What have you come to do now, you wicked woman?! You sold out your own kingdom!”

“I do not agree. If I am a wicked woman, then what are you? You who violated the peace treaty with Ferrier, sent me to Ferrier in place of Hermine, and then tried to have me killed? A wretched demon?” Sara spat out.

Color drained from the king’s face.

King Saleilles had chosen all of this—going to war, sending Sara as a substitute—but when the truth was presented to him, he was at a loss for words. It was unbelievable that everyone born and raised in Saleilles followed this pathetic old man without any say otherwise...

Just then, there was a rustling noise from the entrance. Sara looked back and saw Richard, who had reverted to his human form and had been putting clothes on during that time, standing there with his arms crossed and his expression grim.

With how quickly Richard had gotten dressed, his shirt was open at the chest

and his cloak was roughly thrown on, but he looked much more dignified and worthy of a royal title than the old man groveling at Sara's feet.

"So you are the king of Saleilles... I've heard much about you from Sara."

"...Prince Richard!" the king cowered.

"Why do you look at me with so much hatred? Edouard told you to send over Princess Hermine, did he not? And yet, you deceived us and sent someone else in her place. We will not forgive you for such an act. Moreover, you refused my final call for a peaceful surrender... So, I think you know what comes next."

After this, Richard took a paper offered to him by a soldier and flipped it open. It was an official letter written by King Edouard that laid out all the charges against the Saleilles royal family.

"Even setting aside the issue of the peace treaty, you tried to murder my wife. When you learned that the poisoning was unsuccessful, you ordered an attack at King Edouard's party, making it look as if someone from Ferrier had attempted a premeditated murder against Sara, did you not?"

"Th-That's n—"

"Stop with the excuses," said Sara. "It would do you well not to disrespect the mercy of King Edouard and Prince Richard any more than you already have."

King Saleilles, who had been perfectly meek toward Richard, glared at Sara and snarled at her with such spiteful vigor that spit almost flew from his mouth.

"Sh-Shut up, you wench! I took you in, raised you, and you dare to repay my kindness with such ingratitude?! Who do you think gave you your education and raised you until you were eighteen years—"

"You dare say that to *me*?" Sara asked, sounding more menacing than she ever had in her life.

The king and everyone around him let out quiet squeaks of fear as Sara marched straight up to him, her boots clapping against the floor with every step.

She wanted to laugh at him.

She wanted to sneer as she told him, "You're finished."

But...she couldn't.

Just as she tried to laugh, the corners of her eyes started to burn and her lips twitched downward.

She wanted to mock him by saying, "Serves you right!" but her entire body started to tremble.

Unable to stop the tears rushing down her face in rivers, Sara clutched desperately at her chest and ripped the words out of her heart.

"The—the person who killed my father and mother...was *you*!" she screamed.

"Wha—?"

"*You*—you kept tabs on my appearance since I was a child! Because I was Hermine's second cousin! Because our facial features looked similar, you thought I could be your daughter's body double... You hatched up that plan a long time ago, didn't you?!"

The queen mother had uncovered this truth.

The corsage, the keepsake from Sara's mother, remembered the carriage accident from six years ago.

And the corsage had just barely been able to convey the memory of people surrounding the wreckage, talking in loud voices... "Finally, the baron and his wife are dead! That's two obstacles out of the way." "It was such a pain taking down their business, too." "Now we can give the daughter to the king."

"My family's suspicious sudden bankruptcy, my parents' deaths...it was all because of you! Making me Hermine's substitute because I look like her... You raised me to be a lamb for slaughter! I was a nice little insurance policy if anything were to happen to her, wasn't I?!"

"That's absurd!" the king shouted at once. "Why would you even suggest such a thing?"

But his tone of voice and facial expression conveyed his inner thoughts—*How did she find out?*

The king's plan had been foolproof. As long as his underlings never said a word, the truth would almost certainly have never been revealed. In fact, no

one *had* revealed the truth.

...But the corsage that Sara's mother wore had witnessed everything.

Then it fell into the hands of the queen mother, who learned what happened through her rare powers. And then she told Sara.

"You're wrong! Your parents ruined their own business, and their deaths were their own fault!" the king babbled on shamelessly. "Hermine pitied you, made you her maid, and—*g-gaughh!!!*"

Richard had transformed into the beast in the blink of an eye and had lunged at King Saleilles like a gust of black wind. The king shrieked as Richard plunged his claws into the king's chest.

Blood gushed from the wounds. Richard seemed to have avoided the king's heart, but if he didn't let up, the king would likely die from blood loss.

"Guh...ugh... Help..."

No one spoke.

"Augh... I-It's...not my fault! I only—did it for—Hermine! If they had—given you up earlier—I wouldn't have—killed them! So, there—I admit it—so call off—your beast..."

Right... Tension drained from Sara's shoulders. *Queen Mother...it was really true.*

Sara had wondered if the queen mother might have misread the corsage's memories. She had half hoped that the corsage had simply misremembered... but it was true.

Her parents' deaths were fated the moment the king had set his eyes on her. And the business troubles that had led to their bankruptcy had been the king's doing, too...

But they still wouldn't give up their daughter.

And because Sara had been born the second cousin of Hermine—because they looked alike—her parents had...

Father... Mother...!

Richard growled and jerked his claws out of the king.

Without the sharp talons acting as a plug, blood spurt from the wounds. But Richard gave this no attention, rushing over to nestle into Sara, who had sunk to the floor.

As the mutant soldiers crowded around the king to try to stem the profuse bleeding, Richard put one of his large forepaws on Sara's lap and made a mournful noise.

"Your Highness..."

"Sa...ra..."

It was Richard's human voice.

"What?!"

"H-Hold on, Your Highness!" one of the soldiers cried.

Sara had closed her eyes, but now she opened them in disbelief and saw the Ferrier soldiers in a panic around them, taking off their own cloaks and jackets and draping them over Richard.

"Your Highness! I understand that you want to comfort the princess, but... please don't change back here!"

"...Huh?"

"Oh! I'm sorry, Princess... I didn't mean to interrupt, but... Oh, Your Highness!"

Sara looked on with a stunned expression. Richard emerged from under the mountain of outerwear. He seemed to have quickly thrown on someone's coat and wrapped a cloak around himself—a temporary outfit to keep Sara from shrieking in embarrassment.

Richard's face and hair were coated in sticky dried blood. Even his hands, as they adjusted the cloak around his shoulders, were glistening in fresh red blood.

"Sara..."

When he called out her name, she caught a glimpse of his canine teeth inside his mouth. They were also red. Sara couldn't resist anymore—she threw her arms around him.

“Your Highness...!”

“I heard about what happened to your parents...,” Richard whispered, snaking his arms around her back. “I had no idea you went through something like that...”

Sara squeezed her eyes shut and nodded over and over, clinging to his neck.

“Th-The queen mother read the corsage’s memories and told me... But I still couldn’t believe it...”

“I see... Sara...”

Richard waited until she looked him in the eye.

“Your parents—they never, ever resented you or regretted having you.”

She jumped at his whispered words. A breeze seemed to blow through her chest, which had been hollowed by the king’s admission.

That’s...exactly what I had been thinking.

Sara thought that if her face had been the reason her parents had died...then it would’ve been better if she hadn’t been born at all. At the very least, she should have been born a man.

But these thoughts desecrated her parent’s memory... Even when her family fell into strange financial difficulties, they never gave Sara up. Even when her parents went hungry, they always made sure Sara, at least, was able to eat until she was full. No matter how busy they were, they made sure to carve out time for them to bond as a family. They got Sara whatever she needed so she could study, they listened to her prattle on every day...

Even that fateful day when her parents left her behind and went off in that carriage...didn’t they tell her that they had found a good job a long way away, but if things went well, they’d give her all sorts of yummy food to eat?

Despite this, I...

“You were raised by parents who loved you so much. I’m envious of you for that... I think you’re wonderful.”

Sara started, overwhelmed with emotion.

“The one at fault here is the man who entangled your family in his own selfishness... You’ve worked as hard as you possibly could—made every effort—exhausted yourself for the sake of someone else... So, please, don’t blame yourself.”

“Oh, Richard!”

This time, as tears spilled down Sara’s face, Richard reached out a hand and tenderly wiped them away.

Before, Sara had helped free Richard from the curse his mother had put on his mind, but now, he was helping her come to terms with the reality of her parents’ deaths. The queen mother had told her these truths with a pained look on her face. But she had probably decided she ought to give Sara the chance to confirm it for herself, rather than having the king killed without Sara knowing the truth.

And Sara was sure...even if she resented her own birth, Richard would always be there to take her hand and help her to her feet.

Thank you... Richard... Queen Mother...

Sara clung once more to Richard before standing.

Her eyes landed on the king, who was taking shallow breaths, gasping for air.

He probably wouldn’t hold out for much longer. A soldier had used their ability to close up his wounds, but Richard’s claws had almost certainly hit his lungs. Sooner or later, he would die from blood loss or lack of oxygen.

And when he does...this kingdom will change. With His Majesty Edouard’s kind heart, hopefully this kingdom will become a much better place than when I lived here—

The solemn silence of the room was shattered by a sudden, high-pitched scream.

“Father! Oh no, oh my god...!”

Sara could immediately identify that voice without needing to turn around. Every hair on Sara’s body stood on end.

Wh-Why now, of all times?! Why is she here?!

“Herm—”

“Father! Oh, Father!”

Hermine shoved past Sara, paying no notice of anyone, and rushed up to her father, who lay on the ground covered in blood. Hermine started to wail loudly.

The pale green dress she wore was the exact same dress Firmin had once given Sara.

The one wearing this dress, screaming and addressing the king as “father”...

“I-I’m so sorry, Your Highnesses! She barged in going on about being the princess and demanding to see the king...,” said a young soldier who had finally caught up to them.

Richard blinked in confusion.

“...Is this really Princess Hermine?” Richard muttered to himself, looking back and forth between Sara and the back of Hermine, his eyebrows furrowing. “Surely the only thing they have in common is their hair color?”

“Y-You think so?” asked Sara.

“What? That voice... Wait, Sara?!”

Hermine turned back, finally realizing Sara was there. The moment their eyes met, Hermine’s lovely face contorted with rage, and she slammed her hands against the floor.

“I heard what you did! You little... What a terrible thing to do! Saleilles was your home! My father saved your life!”

“Saleilles *was* my home, but this has nothing to do with that. Also...that man is no benefactor of mine.”

Even as Sara stood before her former master, whom she hadn’t seen in quite some time, her heart was totally unmoved. She simply vaguely thought...

Right, that’s what her face looks like... And that’s what her voice sounds like... And that’s the way she would talk to me...

“You don’t know about this, but your father killed my parents,” Sara explained. “He planned to use me as your body double from the very beginning,

so he took me in to—”

“What? How do you know that?!” Hermine asked, her voice going up in pitch.

“What?!”

This time, it was Sara’s turn to be shocked.

She knew? She knew, and she still interacted with me that way?

Hermine had offered her hand to Sara, knowing her own father had caused the death of Sara’s parents. She had pretended to be her savior.

Hermine had made Sara her substitute, knowing her own father was the reason Sara was all alone.

Even as she knew why Sara had no family in her life, Hermine had stolen Sara’s boyfriend, Firmin, and then had the gall to ask her, “We’ll always be friends...right?”

It was like a seed had snapped open inside of Sara and its budding plant was slowly wriggling out.

She had always had faith in Hermine.

Even though Hermine had betrayed her, Sara had thought that the princess who had reached out to her when she was younger was still there, deep down.

But that was all just make-believe.

That kind princess never existed—not even at the very beginning.

“Hermine... I...”

“Oh? Don’t tell me... Is this person next to you Prince Richard? The man I was going to marry?” Hermine asked, blinking in surprise as she seemed to realize there was someone beside Sara. Then she broke out into a sweet, innocent smile—the same smile Sara used to see every day for years.

“Well... Yes, yes, I see... All right, Sara. I forgive you for all you’ve done wrong.”

“What?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Prince Richard... Or, I suppose I should say, I look

forward to living with you.”

Hermine had reverted to totally ignoring Sara as she reached out to caress Richard’s arm—but Richard flinched out of her reach right away, causing Hermine to lose her footing and slip.

Richard’s eyes were like ice as he looked down at Hermine. Sara was frozen in surprise. He pulled Sara close and wrapped his arms around her.

“I have no need for you...,” he said to Hermine. “Get out of my sight.”

“Come now, don’t say something so heartless. I’m the *real* Hermine. It seems that impostor has been deceiving you for a long time, Your Highness... I will be serving you as your wife for the rest of our lives.”

“I don’t want you... Hey, stay away! Don’t touch me!”

“Stop this, Hermine!”

Hermine was still trying to press closer to Richard. Sara’s mind was in a whirlwind of confusion—she couldn’t understand the princess’s thought process at all.

Hermine’s fatally wounded father is right behind her, on the brink of death; the Saleilles royal family is already on the verge of collapse; and Richard’s entire body is covered in blood from the battle.

But Hermine’s behavior had shifted entirely. Now she was trying to nestle against Richard and fawn over him... Sara couldn’t even begin to understand her.

Sara felt disgusted and distrustful, but more than anything, she couldn’t see Hermine as anything but a strange, incomprehensible creature.

Sara’s face was starting to lose color in horror. Richard held her closer as he knocked Hermine’s small hands away.

“Stay back! I heard everything about you from Sara. You asked her to take your place, and then you stole her lover! I have no desire to take a woman like that in marriage! Sara is more than enough to be my wife!”

“Come on, what are you talking about? The documents have already been submitted for *our* marriage, Your Highness. That maid over there has already

wedded Firmin. Firmin is an idiot and a scoundrel for exposing my body—I have no love for him. Your feelings for her—your physical relationship with her—they don’t matter. I am *already* your consort, Your Highness.”

Sara stood there in shock. Hermine’s reasoning was too high-handed, but... frustratingly, it made some sense.

Richard had told her that the marriages had been invalid from the start. Sara didn’t want to doubt him, but she could also follow the logic of Hermine’s argument...

Right now, the marriage oath documents written and filed described two couples—Richard and Hermine, and Firmin and Sara. If you set aside the fact that the two women had swapped places, the marriage between “Richard” and “Hermine” was perfectly valid.

So that means Richard is...

Sara’s fingers went cold. Her entire body started to shake in Richard’s embrace.

She didn’t notice, but as she was hunched over and trembling, Hermine sneered down at her. Richard was silent. Hermine looked at him and gave a spellbound sigh.

“My goodness... You’re so beautiful. Your Highness, my maid has acted abominably. I will atone for the sins committed by my father and Sara, and one day, I will give birth to your child—”

“You’re out of your mind...”

Richard gave a low growl. It sounded just like a beast—

No, it wasn’t a similar growl—he *was* turning into the beast!

Sara felt Richard’s nails lengthen and harden where they held her shoulders. The goose-bump-inducing smell of the beast wafted from his body, and sharp canine teeth poked out of the corners of his slightly open mouth.

Even Hermine’s expression changed at the strange mood shift. Hermine had looked around the room anxiously at the low growl—when she finally realized that Richard was gradually transforming, her eyes bulged.

“Huh?! Wh-What is this?! Your Highness...!”

Richard seemed to be saying something, but the words became animalistic roars in his throat, and then the jet-black beast fully emerged.

The random soldier’s jacket slipped off Richard as he stepped protectively in front of Sara. Hermine shook from head to toe. When her eyes found his shining, sharp teeth, she let out a shriek.

“He’s a m-monster! What is this?! Is this some kind of mutant ability?!”

Sara simply stared at her.

“S-Sara! This is no time to be zoning out! Get over here, quick!” Hermine barked at her.

“Why would I do that?” Sara asked calmly—so calmly, in fact, that she surprised herself.

Hermine’s eyes widened. After seeing Sara’s utterly unaffected manner, the princess ground her teeth together.

“Y-You idiot! I’m telling you to protect me! Let him eat you instead of me!”

At that moment, Sara heard the shattering noise of something inside her breaking into a million tiny pieces. The master Sara used to love and respect would betray her until the very end.

Sara smiled at Hermine and parted her lips.

“No.”

Hermine started to scream something back at her, but before any noise left her mouth—

The black shadow lunged forward, brandishing his sharp claws.

Hermine’s screams intermingled with the roar of the beast.

There was a spray of scarlet blood, which arced in the air and splattered on the floor.

Richard turned away, dove into the mountain of jackets, and immediately returned to his human form. Hermine was standing in front of Sara, blood gushing from her face. She was covered in so much blood that it was almost

hard to tell where she had been hit, but it seemed as though Richard had slashed her face with his sharp claws.

Richard could have nicked her carotid artery with his claws. He could have also punctured her lungs, like he did her father.

But Richard didn't give her an easy death...

For someone as vain as Hermine, nothing would have been more painful than having to live with deep scars carved across her face.

"Ow-ow-ow! Ouuuch! Sara! Help me! It hurts! My face! It's hot! Agh!!!"

"Hermine! Are you there?!"

The voice of the new visitor was muddled up with the sounds of the Ferrier soldiers, who had been watching the scene unfold, trying to keep the visitor back.

Sara stayed as she was, too annoyed to even turn around anymore. "You came, too, Firmin?"

"What?! Is that you, Sara?! A-Ahhh! Wh-Why is Hermine like that?!"

"So, you're Firmin? I've been wanting to meet you."

Richard, who seemed to have dressed quickly in the meantime, stood up and walked over to Firmin. Firmin stood frozen in shock in front of Hermine, who was covered in blood and writhing in pain. Richard's right hand, hanging down by his side, was stained red on all fingers except his thumb.

Now that Sara looked at the two men side by side, she realized that—surprisingly—Richard was shorter than Firmin. But with his dignified profile on full display, he was astronomically more beautiful. Firmin remained stock-still, unable to say anything to the foreign royal from the kingdom of abilities.

"I am Richard of Ferrier. As the man who will one day be *Sara's* husband, I have a personal grudge against you."

"Huh? Sara's—*guh!*"

Firmin was effortlessly bowled over when Richard's fist made contact with his stomach.

In his human form, Richard was a slender young man with the constitution of someone who didn't get out much. Firmin, who belonged to the Knights of the Guard, certainly had a more muscular physique. But even with this, Firmin was easily knocked down and ended up landing on Hermine. Hermine, pinned under him, let out a scream.

"Ow! Wh-What are you doing?!" Firmin shouted.

"If you want to know why I hit you, look deep inside yourself and give it some serious thought... Oh, that's right. I'm going to return to my kingdom with Sara, and I will be marrying her as 'Sara,' so you are going to dissolve your marriage to 'Sara' immediately. After that...you can figure out what to do with that woman of yours. Well, she did tell me you were a scoundrel and that she wanted to marry me, but...I had absolutely no interest, so I refused... Sara?"

"Yes, my prince."

Sara took Richard's left hand and got to her feet.

Then, with all the Ferrier soldiers bowing their heads in respect, they started to leave the room. Suddenly, Sara looked back.

The man who used to be her king was rolling around on the floor, his lungs punctured, on the verge of death.

The woman who used to be her master lay facedown in front of him, her face covered with blood.

The man who used to be her lover lay in shock in a pile with the bloodstained woman.

"Hermine... Shall I respond to your last letter now?" Sara said, calling out to the half-conscious woman. "I *will* be happy in Ferrier, far away from Saleilles... together with the prince."

And so, this was her genuine, final...

"Farewell."

Sara smiled.

She shot a dignified, elegant, and slightly pitying look at the bleeding woman and the stunned man covered in her blood.

Farewell, past me.

With her hand in Richard's, Sara looked forward.

And she never looked back again.



THE king teetered on the edge of life and death for some time, but not long after affixing his seal to a document pronouncing his son as the next king and establishing an alliance with Ferrier, the king succumbed to his blood loss.

Prince Alphonse, who had been driven away to the backcountry, was immediately summoned to the royal castle and enthroned as king, per the prior king's last will and testament. When the prince heard about the situation, he remained humble, insisting that he was still out of his depth in ruling the kingdom, and asked for King Edouard of Ferrier's assistance.

Ferrier had originally intended to partially rule over Saleilles in name only through the alliance, but King Edouard was so impressed with King Alphonse's response that he reduced the reparations inflicted from Saleilles's breach of treaty to a lower amount than they had originally planned.

Moreover, at the recommendation of everyone around him, King Alphonse exiled Princess Hermine from the royal family and ordered her to live as a commoner. The princess had brutally rebelled against this order, but now that her true character had been exposed, there was no one with any authority who would support her.

There were rumors that the former princess Hermine had thereafter thrown herself into the ocean in grief over the hideous four long scars on her face, but no one knew for certain. It was certain, however, that after the ascension of the new king, no one saw the former princess or the man expelled from a certain viscount's family in the royal capital ever again.

And so, the heart of Saleilles governance consisted of the new king, the new prime minister (a young man who used to live with Alphonse in the backcountry), and the old knight commander, who had miraculously recovered from his grave injuries. With this, the Kingdom of Saleilles prospered and its people continued to cherish the beautiful, traditional culture they once took

pride in.

The friendship between King Alphonse and King Edouard grew stronger, and one day their children were joined in a happy political marriage, erasing any lingering tensions that existed between the two kingdoms...but that is a story for another day.

Chapter 6: Sara's Happiness

"**YOUR** Highness..."

"No."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"I know what you're going to say, but I'm *absolutely* not going."

In the royal villa, an estate near the royal castle of the Kingdom of Ferrier, two people were speaking to each other.

Prince Richard, the king's older brother, sat at his desk in the study, his pen scrawling rapidly over a document. Sara, standing in front of him with her hands on her hips, was attempting to persuade him into something, although Richard was stubbornly unwilling to get up from his chair.

"The king went through all the trouble of planning a medal ceremony in commemoration of winning the war. What's he going to do if the medal recipient doesn't show up?"

Daniel had tried to persuade Richard to go initially, but after getting nowhere, he begged Sara to help. And so, the task had fallen to her.

Oh dear..., Sara had thought before she went to try to persuade the prince. Richard, however, was very stubborn and wouldn't budge an inch.

"We didn't need a ceremony like that in the first place. I didn't do nearly enough to merit receiving a medal."

"This argument again... The people of Saleilles say you saved them from being afflicted by a corrupt government! I heard they've even taken to calling you the 'Black Warrior' now..."

"Please stop. That's so embarrassing..." Richard really did seem to dislike it. He finally raised his head. "Anyway, I'm not leaving this place unless there's *actual* business for me to attend to. Call Daniel for me. I'll write a reply of absence."

“Your Highness...”

“No.”

“I would very much like to see you being awarded a medal, Your Highness...” she persisted.

“.....”

“.....”

“Call for Daniel.”

“.....”

“Don’t look at me like that... If that’s what you really want, I suppose I have no choice,” Richard caved. “I *really* don’t want to do this, but I’ll write a reply of attendance.”

“Your Highness!” Sara cried, her expression quickly softening.

Richard rested his chin on his hands and looked away. “But you’ll be going, too, of course. You’ll watch me receive this medal, and you’ll sit closer than everyone else. If you don’t come, I won’t attend.”

“Yes, of course I will! I’d be thrilled to!”

“...As long as you’re happy, that’s enough for me,” muttered Richard idly.

Just then, the door to the study opened and Daniel peered in.

Sara hadn’t called for him yet, but the chamberlain had probably assumed they were nearly finished and had come to see how things were going.

“Oh! Are you done convincing him?” he asked.

“Yes. He says he’ll attend if I do, too.” Sara smiled.

“Oh, thank goodness! Of course I’ll prepare a seat for Sara as well! Oh—I really am grateful, Sara! Now I can wrap this up without the king bullying me!”

“Stop talking about such trivial matters,” said Richard, sounding irritated.

But then, perhaps because he overheard Sara’s stifled giggles, he cleared his throat and snatched the RSVP document out of Daniel’s hand.

I can’t believe the days have returned where I can be by Richard’s side like

this...

Sara wasn't sure if Daniel could always rely on her to persuade Richard—a man who stubbornly wanted to remain a hermit—out of the house, but Richard would always listen to Sara's arguments fairly. It made her happy that the others relied on her, too.

"Oh, that's right," said Daniel. "That document you were expecting arrived from Saleilles, and His Majesty validated it right away."

Claire entered the study and handed Daniel the letter rolled up like a scroll.

Daniel untied the tasseled cord holding it together, unrolled it, and placed it on Richard's desk, so Sara came over to look, too. The letter stated, *The marriage between Hermine Maria Saleilles and Richard Fénéon Ferrier has been declared invalid*, and was affixed with King Alphonse of Saleilles's signature.

The marriage between Richard and Hermine had been invalid from the beginning because of Saleilles's deception, so Hermine's older brother had officially recognized that, instead of divorcing them.

The marriage between Firmin and Sara had similarly been discredited as well, resulting in Sara and Richard becoming two single people with no prior history of marriage.

Richard had been grouchily writing his RSVP to the ceremony, but when he read this new document, his frustration dissipated at once and he let out a sigh of relief.

"I see... That's great."

"Yes," said Sara, "it really is."

"And you have no history of marrying that man... So now I can marry you without any reserve," Richard said in a gentle voice.

Sara looked up at him. There was a small smile on his face, his cheeks were slightly red, and he looked at her affectionately.

"Sara, this time I want *you* as my consort. Not as a substitute for the princess, but as Sara, the daughter of a baron from Saleilles," he said, his voice overflowing with tenderness.

He beckoned her to him. She approached him without a moment's hesitation. Richard took her hand and pulled her into his arms, sitting her squarely in his lap.

Sara saw her own reflection in those kind green eyes that resembled the plains of Ferrier.

Richard's thin lips curved into a gentle, happy smile, and his bony fingers carded through the golden hair falling across Sara's cheek (she had cut it a little shorter).

"I want you as my consort, Sara. And...if in the future, I leave the royal family, I want you to be with me as my wife then, too. I want to drink tea with you, sleep with you, and greet every morning with you by my side," he said passionately.

That was certainly a marriage proposal bursting with devotion!

It was totally different from the way Richard had spoken to Sara when he had married her for political reasons, because Edouard told him to, or because she was a hostage of Ferrier. His words rang with the truth that he truly wanted Sara, from the bottom of his heart.

I'm so happy.

Sara had no idea that being wanted—someone desiring you, needing you, and wanting to be with you—could be such a happy thing.

She nodded.

But just once wasn't enough—she nodded again and again.

"Yes... Thank you. Please make me your wife."

"I know I'm the one asking you to marry me, but...are you really sure? I'll probably always prefer staying shut up in my room, and I'm not the kind of person who can say witty and charming things to you..."

"Oh? Well, then I'll shut myself indoors with you, if the need arises. And all I need to be happy is hearing you speak in a way that is quintessentially *you*...like the way you proposed to me just now," Sara said, smiling.

Richard's eyes widened a fraction, and his fair cheeks turned faintly pink. His

eyebrows furrowed together, and he scowled at her with an angry glint in his eyes, but she was fully aware that he was just trying to hide his embarrassment.

“Your idea of happiness is too modest. You can be more selfish, you know.”

“It’s not too modest! But what about you? Isn’t there something you want to do, Your Highness?”

“Something I want to do?”

Richard looked surprised for a moment that she had turned the question back on him, but then he thought it over for a while. *That’s a good reaction*, she thought excitedly, watching Richard ponder.

He’s rarely ever told me the things he’s wanted to do. From now on, I want to help make lots of Richard’s wishes come true!

Sara wasn’t satisfied with only ever being given things.

She wanted to give back to Richard, just as much if not more than he had given to her.

“Not really,” he finally replied. “Just living our days together as we always have would be enough for me. Talking to you and having tea with you every day, and then—”

He suddenly stopped and looked at Sara, and his cheeks turned a bright shade of red.

“W-Well... Sara...”

“Yes?”

“The sources we have tells us that nearly everyone born in Ferrier who had this ability of transformation died young, never reaching the end of their natural life spans. So there isn’t much of a precedent for someone like me. But at least abilities are not passed down genetically. I just happened to be born with this one by chance—neither my parents nor my relatives have an ability like mine.”

“R-Right...”

Sara tried filling in the silence where she was expected to respond, but she

had no idea why he was suddenly talking about his ability.

Richard had said this all in a single breath. He paused, then opened his mouth again, chewing on his words for some reason.

“In—in other words...my ability would not be inherited. So—that’s not the only reason—but... One day, I’d like for us to have a child.”

“What?!” Sara squeaked.

“A-A child!” he repeated.

“I-I know! I can hear you!” Sara shouted back at him, her face suddenly just as red as Richard’s.



Sara could hear Daniel and Claire from the corner of the room muttering, “Oh my!” and “Good heavens!” Sara glanced over at them and saw them leave the room. Then she addressed Richard, who had hung his head.

“U-Um... So, you’re saying that I should give birth to your child?”

“No, not exactly... I don’t want you to say it like it’s an obligation. But if it’s something we both want, and we have a child together...I would be very happy.”

Richard lifted his head again. He covered his mouth with his right hand, which was curled into a fist, and looked away.

“With that said, I probably wouldn’t be a good father, but...if it’s a child you’ve given birth to, I could love it. So...I had hoped you would think it over. Yeah...that’s what I was thinking.”

“Your Highness...”

“Sara, if it’s agreeable to you...would you please call me by my name?”

He looked up at Sara, the outer corners of his green eyes slightly red.

He was looking at her with such tender eyes... A giggle slipped out of Sara’s mouth as she put a hand against his cheek.

“Yes, Richard.”

“...Let’s have a wedding ceremony. I want to hear all your opinions about it, and I’ll have your dream dress made for you.”

As Richard spoke in a soft voice about their future together, his eyes were softer than Sara could have ever conceived at the beginning of their marriage.

I love that look in his eyes.

This man, who had gone through so many hardships in his life, who had lingering wounds from his early childhood that would be difficult to heal entirely, was giving Sara such a tender look.

And that look was only for Sara.

“Yes...,” Richard continued. “We’ll incorporate all your favorite things. Shall we have sweet butter cake at the wedding reception? I’ll make it, if you want.”

“That’s a great idea. That’s...wonderful.”

Richard smiled.

“I’ll always be by your side... I love you, Sara.”

“I’ll always be with you, too... I love you, Richard.”

When Sara tucked her head between Richard’s collar and his chin, she could smell the gentle scent from his sachet.

When their lips met, she could taste the marlo-infused tea he had drunk earlier.

A world of their own, where no one would disturb them.

The rose corsage, tucked away on a bookshelf, watched over them quietly.



EVERY person in Ferrier knew of Prince Richard and his wife, Sara.

The two had overcome various obstacles before getting married. After that, they started to appear in society as husband and wife and were adored by the general public.

Some time later, Prince Richard drafted a law that declared, “All of Ferrier’s citizens have the right to live,” regardless of whether they had an ability or what that ability was. Their lives were not to be threatened.

There were too many accounts of people who had an ability like the prince’s being taken advantage of, murdered as children, or suffering prejudice and discrimination because of it.

The prince wanted to eradicate this and took the lead to stamp out the discrimination that had been plaguing Ferrier for centuries.

With Richard’s new law, people with the ability to transform their bodies into beasts assembled at the royal villa.

The prince, who also had this ability, trained them, and his wife, a foreigner without any ability, taught them. Through this, their students learned how to be social and cooperative, and many of them joined the Ferrier army, now with pride in the talents they were born with and a desire to serve their kingdom.

Prince Richard refined his training system, and when King Edouard married and produced an heir, the prince officially left the royal family and supported King Edouard's government affairs as a former royal and a duke.

It seemed to be an ingrained habit for Richard to wear his mask, and he continued to wear one whenever he went to see his vassals.

However, on the very rare occasions that Richard was outdoors without a mask, he was always looking at his beloved wife and children with eyes that overflowed with love.



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